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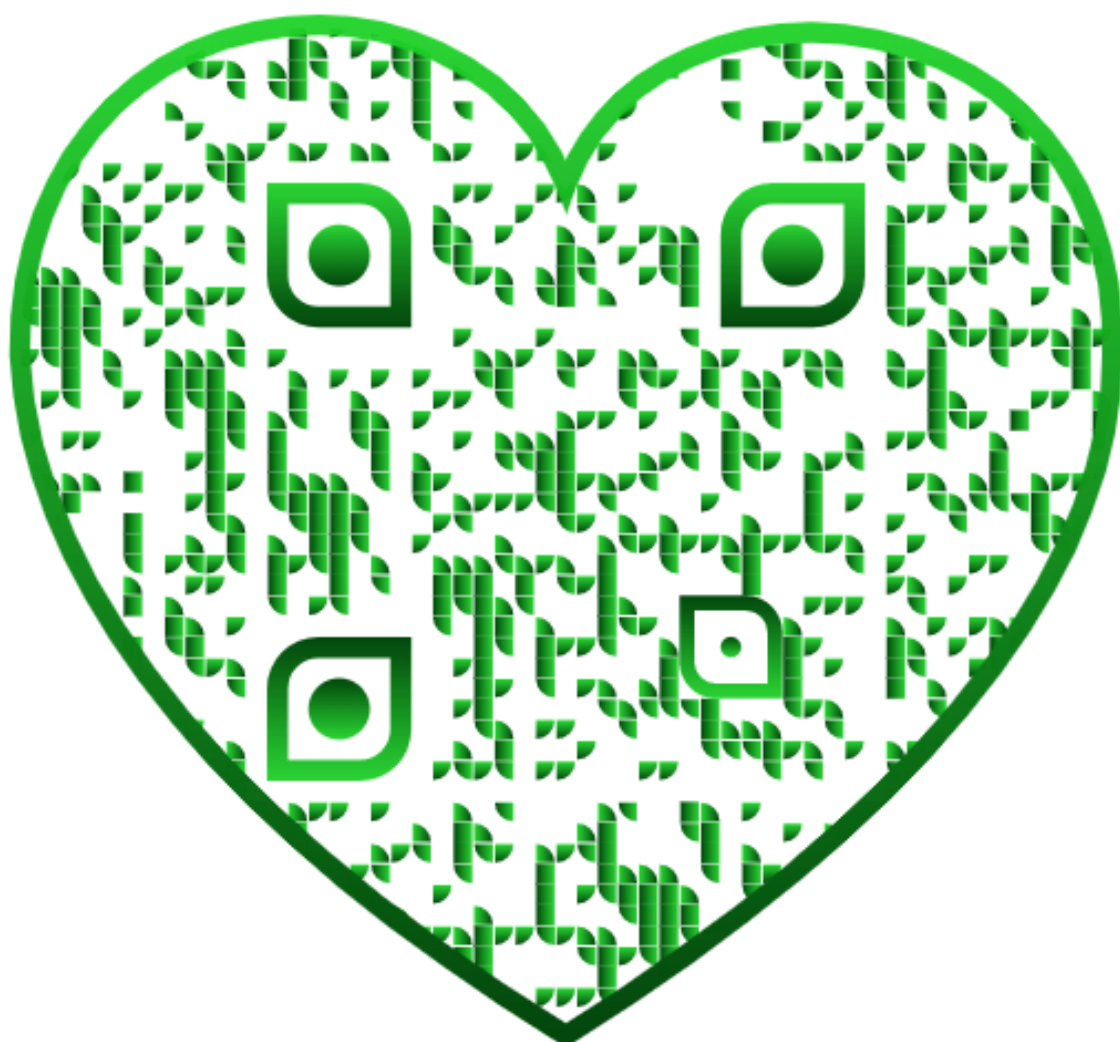
Literary locations

Discover the inspirations behind *Dracula*, *Harry Potter*,
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Country in autumn

The remarkable migration
of the European eel

Ian McEwan on his hotly
anticipated new novel

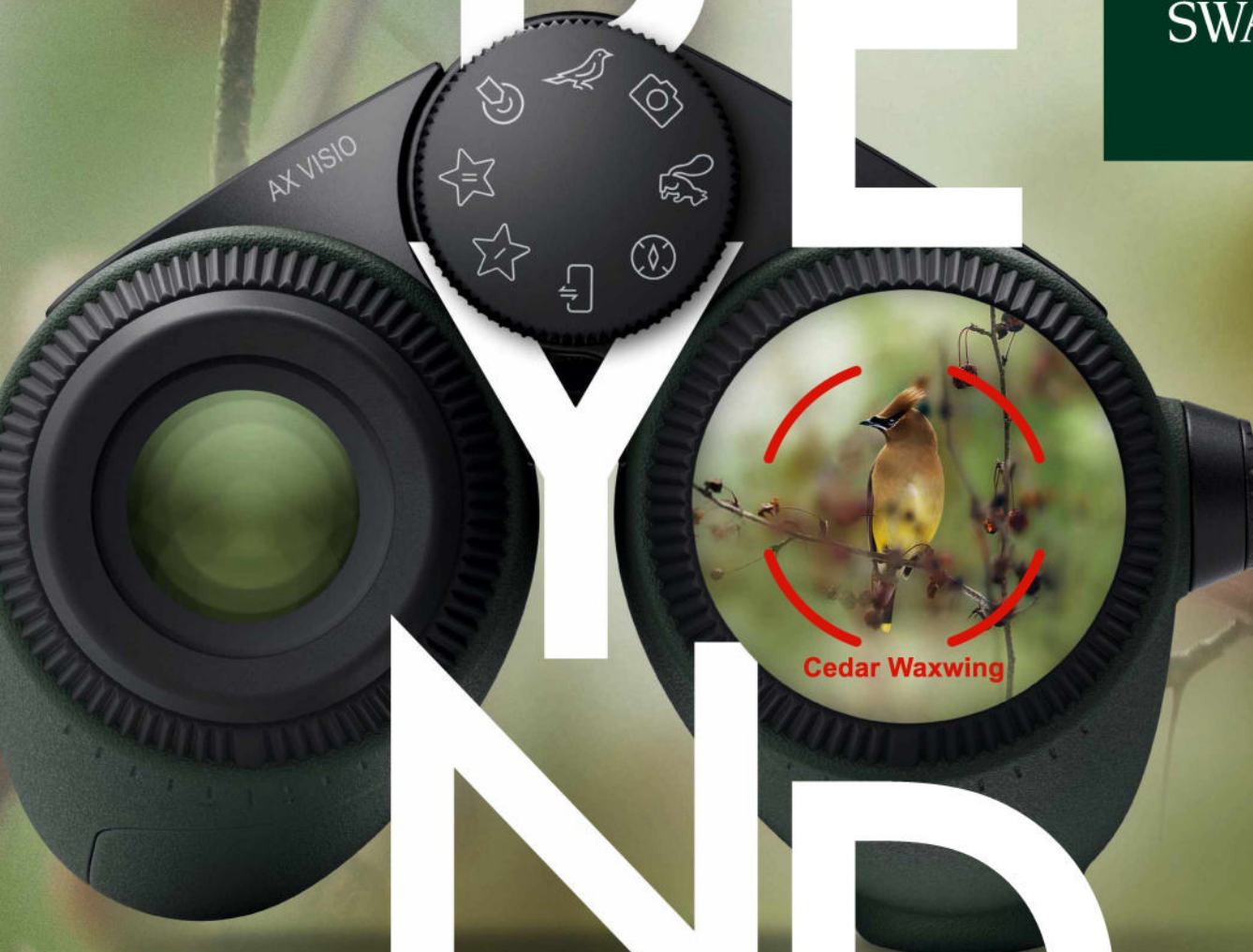


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You, too, can play Pooh Sticks on the bridge that inspired AA Milne in Ashdown Forest, East Sussex

Down memory lane



“Just over the old railway bridge from my house, down the hill to where the footpath crosses the brook by the church, that's Pooh Sticks Bridge, where we stop for a game of Pooh Sticks when we go for a walk. Okay, it's not *the* Pooh Sticks Bridge – it's not even my first Pooh Sticks Bridge. That one is along the road from my parents' house, and down at the bottom of the lane – the one where I played as a boy.

I have a very clear memory from those days of being given a book token by an aunt, and taking it to the bookshop in town. The choice was overwhelming, but in the end I plumped for *The World of Pooh*, and soon lost myself in 100 Aker Wood. Fast forward a couple of decades to when I learned that Christopher Robin was a real boy, and Pooh his own bear, and that 100 Aker Wood was a real place – it was all a little much to take in.

Somehow, I've as yet not made the pilgrimage to Ashdown Forest in East Sussex to see Eeyore's gloomy place, dodge the heffalump trap or see how Christopher Robin's bridge compares to my own. But our feature this issue about the real places behind classic books has inspired me, and I've decided to take that trip down memory lane. I hope you find inspiration in these pages just as I did in that old book – which I still have, by the way.

Paul

Paul McGuinness, editor



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COUNTRYFILE on TV

What to watch on
Countryfile this month*

5 October

It's time for the Countryfile Ramble in aid of BBC Children in Need. The team meets a group of remarkable young people, each of whom has been set a special ramble challenge by Pudsey in the Shropshire and Staffordshire border region.



12 October

The UK drinks more cider than anywhere else in the world, and 2025 brought the earliest harvest many apple growers in the UK have ever seen. Charlotte Smith and Adam Henson travel to Herefordshire to visit two cider producers.



19 October

Matt Baker and Charlotte explore Kent's French connections and discover more about a bid for UNESCO status for a Cross-Channel Geopark, which would formally unite Kent and northern France as a shared geological landscape.

26 October

Covering 14,000 hectares of the Derbyshire Dales, Chatsworth Estate is famous for providing the backdrop for the 2005 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. During the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth, *Countryfile* visits the real-life Pemberley to explore its lesser-known landscapes.

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OUR COLUMNISTS



John Craven, 'Behind the lens, our love of nature endures', p26
"The photo competition became so popular we were soon dealing with sackfuls of entries."



Adam Henson, 'A tech revolution in farming is underway', p29
"Could we soon be sowing and harvesting crops with a swarm of AI-enabled pilotless drones?"



Nicola Chester, 'Public transport is failing rural youth', p98
"When school transport doesn't offer a 'late' bus, many rural children are cut off from extracurricular activities."

BBC

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FRONT COVER IMAGE

Whitby Abbey by Neal Rylatt/Getty Images

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Kick off the spooky season with a visit to a pumpkin picking farm to find your perfect fright-night accessory. However you carve your pumpkin, choosing a grey or white variety, such as Casper or Polar bear, endows an extra eerie effect. And save the scooped out flesh - it's perfect baked, roasted or in a warming soup

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Pick your perfect pumpkin

Pull your wellies on and get into the spirit of autumn with a subscription to *BBC Countryfile Magazine*

Check out this month's special subscription offer, page 30

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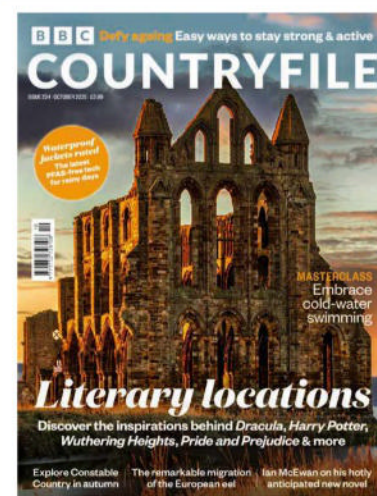
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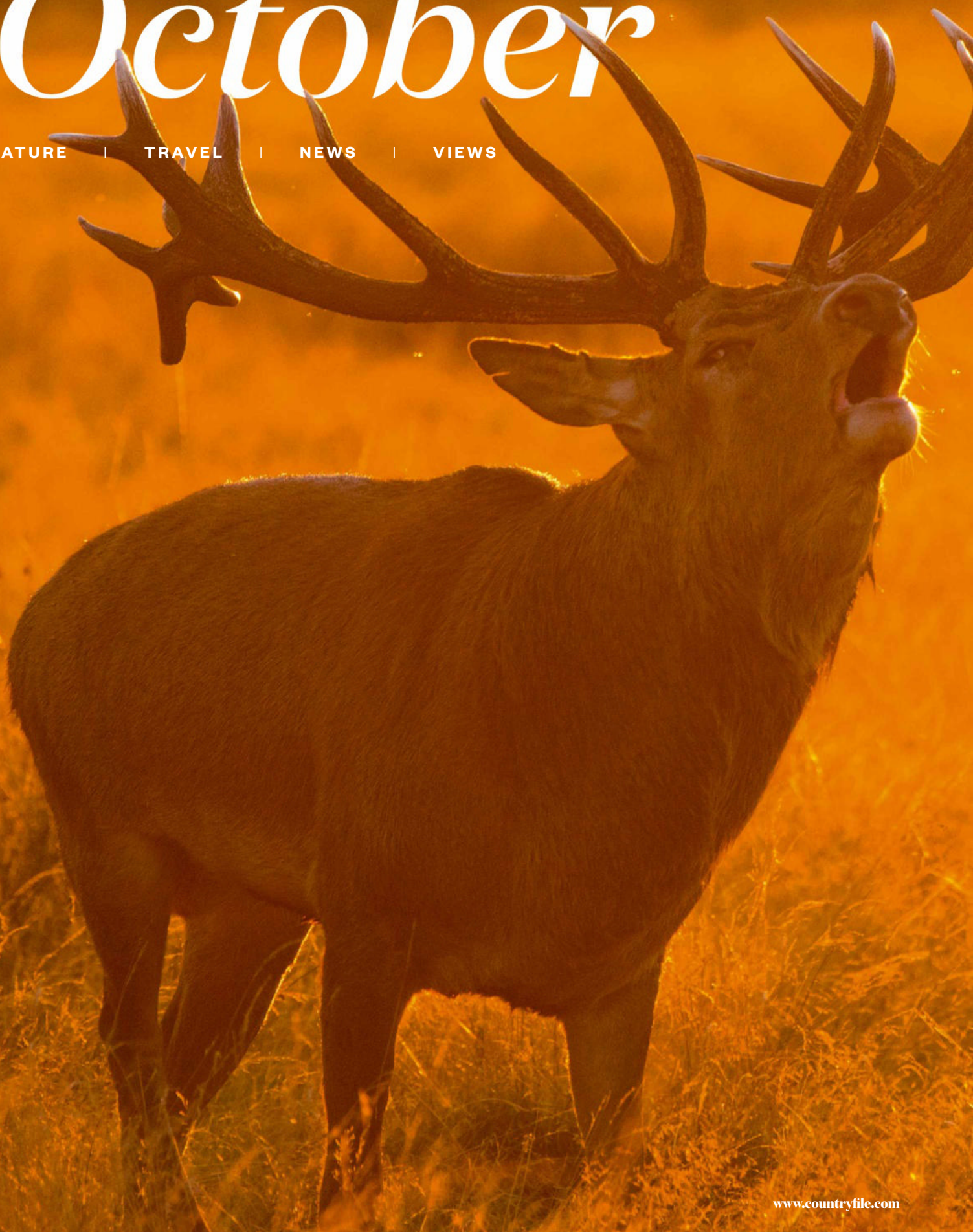


ON THE COVER

The ruins of Whitby Abbey in North Yorkshire, which influenced Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

October

NATURE | TRAVEL | NEWS | VIEWS





The roar power of the red deer rut in Richmond Park, south-west London

Visit Richmond's open spaces this autumn and you'll see red – and not only the shed leaves creating a rust-hued carpet on the tree-studded slopes of Richmond and Bushy Parks. Between them, these expanses are home to more than 950 red and fallow deer, with males now energetically engaged in the boisterous mating season or 'rut' as they guard harems or vie to attract females. From September to mid-November, red stags and fallow bucks roar and bark loudly to display their might and virility – and if that's not enough, will clash huge racks of antlers to see off rivals. The red deer is Britain's largest land mammal, with stags reaching up to 200kg and 1.37m tall at the shoulder, their bellows echoing across the parks.

Buildings on the move

Dixie Wills picks seven of the most mind-boggling, ingenious and/or expensive structural relocations from around the globe, featuring mighty mansions, colossal churches and a British bridge transferred all the way across the Atlantic Ocean

1 KIRUNA CHURCH, SWEDEN

Not just any old place of worship, Kiruna Church was once voted the most beautiful pre-1950 construction in all of Sweden. Unfortunately, the 113-year-old timber building was also endangered by ground subsidence brought on by Kiruna's iron ore mines. Lifted onto a 224-wheeled trolley, the 672-tonne church spent two days travelling three miles to its new home in August 2025.

2 ST FAGANS NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY, CARDIFF

Founded in 1946, St Fagans on the outskirts of Cardiff takes its inspiration from the world's oldest open-air museum – Skansen in Sweden – which features reconstructed original buildings from around the country. St Fagans's eclectic collection of over 40 relocated buildings includes a chapel, shops, a pub, a tollbooth and even a pigsty.

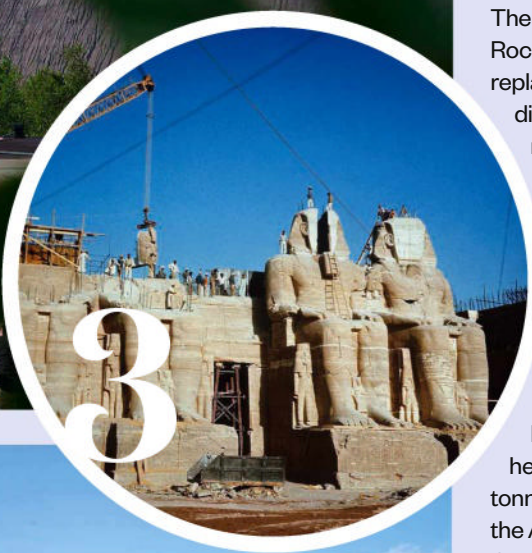
3 LOWER NUBIA, EGYPT AND SUDAN

The successful relocation of 22 ancient monuments in Lower Nubia during the building of the Aswan Dam was described in UNESCO's magazine as "the greatest archaeological rescue operation of all time". Involving a 50-nation coalition, it was completed in 1980, after two decades. The monuments, including the two temples of Abu Simbel, were cut up, dismantled, moved to higher ground and carefully reassembled.

4 BELLE TOUT, EAST SUSSEX

While some lighthouses have been taken down and reconstructed (see Smeaton's Tower), Belle Tout, on Beachy Head, was simply picked up and moved. Or rather, in 1999 the 850-tonne building was carefully slid 17m along greased steel-topped beams, saving it from toppling into the sea as the cliffs eroded. Its new site has been designed so it can be moved further inland if necessary.





4 **5 SMEATON'S TOWER, PLYMOUTH**

The tower began life as a lighthouse on Eddystone Rocks off the Cornish coast. When a new light replaced it in 1882, the 22m-high edifice was dismantled and rebuilt on Plymouth Hoe as a memorial to its designer, John Smeaton. A hazardous undertaking, the lowest section proved too difficult to move and the stump remains on Eddystone Rocks today.

6 **LONDON BRIDGE, ARIZONA, USA**

In 1968, the 137-year-old London Bridge could not cope with the capital's traffic and was sold to Missourian oilman Robert P McCulloch for \$2.46m. (It's a myth he thought he was buying Tower Bridge.) A cool 10,000 tonnes of its granite blocks were shipped across the Atlantic and rebuilt over the Bridgewater Channel at Lake Havasu City as a tourist attraction.

7 **39 FIZULI STREET, AZERBAIJAN**

But all of these pale in comparison with 39 Fizuli Street, Baku. The 20m-high mansion, built by an oil magnate in 1908, weighs in at 18,000 tonnes and in April 2013 became the world's heaviest building ever moved intact. A Dutch engineering firm was given the task of shifting it precisely 10.5m. It's just a pity the reason for the venture was so prosaic: it was shifted as part of a road-widening scheme. **CF**



ANCIENT COW TOOTH COULD HELP SOLVE A MYSTERY OF STONEHENGE, SAY SCIENTISTS

Analysis of a 5,000-year-old tooth may suggest how huge stones were moved vast distances

Research into a humble molar from a cow's jawbone may have brought scientists a little closer to unlocking one of the mysteries of Stonehenge: how our Neolithic forebears transported the monument's vast bluestones from south Wales to Wiltshire.

The jawbone in question was unearthed in 1924 by the south entrance to the site. It was dated to 2995–2900 BCE – around the time the first circular henge was created – and had evidently been placed there deliberately for an as-yet unknown purpose.

Now a paper published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science* reports that, using advanced isotope analysis on a single tooth from that jawbone, researchers from the British Geological Survey (BGS), Cardiff University and University College London learned details about this cow's life – and, in turn, perhaps about the ancient monument.

The scientists sliced the third molar into nine horizontal sections, and measured oxygen, carbon, strontium and lead isotopes to build up a picture of the cow's diet and activities. Looking at the oxygen isotopes, the researchers detected that they were dealing with a six-month period in the animal's second year, stretching from winter into summer.

Analysis of carbon isotopes pointed to a change in diet over that time: feeding in woodlands over the winter before heading out to pasture in the summer. Study of the strontium isotopes showed that the cow's food had come from different geological areas – so either it had moved, or its winter fodder had been brought to it.

Finally, from the lead isotopes, researchers learned that the cow had come from a location with Palaeozoic rocks – and the bluestones of Stonehenge come from such an area: the Preseli Hills in Pembrokeshire, south Wales.



Might cows have helped haul Stonehenge's massive bluestones from south Wales to Wiltshire?

Professor Jane Evans, BGS honorary research associate, explains: "This study has revealed unprecedented details of six months in a cow's life, providing the first evidence of cattle movement from Wales as well as documenting dietary changes and life events that happened around 5,000 years ago."

Michael Parker Pearson, professor of British later prehistory at University College London, went further: "This is yet more fascinating evidence for Stonehenge's link with south-west Wales. It raises the tantalising possibility that cattle helped to haul the stones."

If our ancestors did call on some bovine assistance to shift the bluestones, it's nice to think that they may have recognised this one cow's heroic efforts by burying a little part of her in a place of honour. **Dixie Wills**



An example of a cow's third molar tooth, which develops in the animal's second year of life

LOCALS BACK LYNX RETURN IN NORTHERN ENGLAND

New research shows that many people support a plan to reintroduce the native cat to Northumberland

Nearly three out of four people support the idea of reintroducing lynx to Kielder Forest in Northumberland, according to a lengthy consultation exercise carried out in the area by conservationists.

Research by The Missing Lynx Project, which is exploring the feasibility of reintroducing this native medium-sized cat to northern England, shows that an area spanning north-west Northumberland, the edge of Cumbria and southern Scotland could support about 60 lynx.

The consultation has seen 10,000 people visit a touring exhibition, and also included one-to-one interviews with stakeholders such as farmers, landowners, foresters and other community members.

"We now know that lynx could flourish here, and that there's broad support among people in the area to bring them back," says a spokesperson for The Missing Lynx Project. "We hope to apply for a licence – but only once we have a plan that's collaboratively designed with local people, and which sets out measures that are acceptable, feasible and can be implemented."



England's largest forest, Kielder, could be a suitable home for reintroduced lynx

Lynx are believed to have died out in England and Wales around 500 CE, though they may have clung on in Scotland until the mid-18th century. Their main prey base today would be roe deer, of which there are an estimated 500,000 in Great Britain.

However, many farmers fear that lynx would also take sheep, and dealing with any predation of domestic livestock will be a key issue to resolve before any reintroduction. In the past, UK politicians have largely been unwilling to commit to such a move.

Michael Gove, when he was environment secretary, rejected a licence application (not submitted by The Missing Lynx Project) to release six lynx into Kielder in 2018. And Thérèse Coffey, who was environment

secretary for a short period, said she did not support the idea of reintroducing lynx.

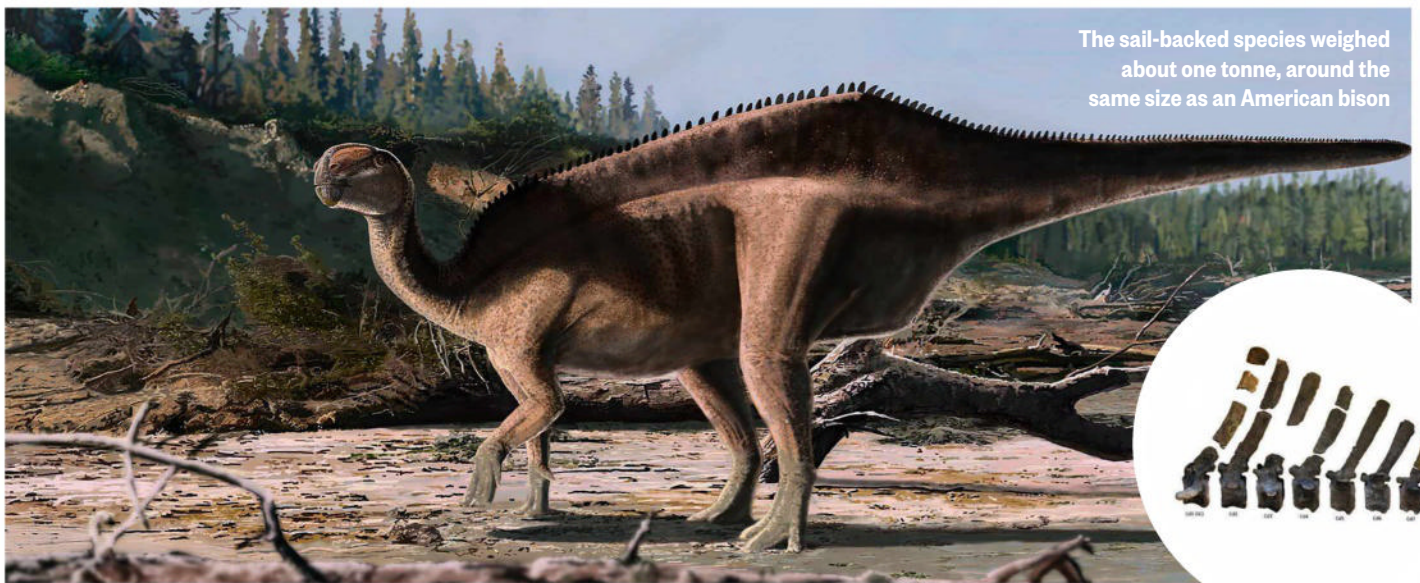
Nevertheless, governments have consistently shown support for efforts to restore nature at scale within the UK, argues The Missing Lynx Project, "and part of that involves bringing back lost species. We have national and international commitments to consider the restoration of missing native species, including lynx," it adds.

Beside Kielder, areas that could support self-sustaining lynx populations include Aberdeenshire and Galloway in Scotland. Other locations, such as the North York Moors, the Peak District, the New Forest and Wales, were found to be unsuitable.

James Fair

NEWLY IDENTIFIED DINOSAUR SPECIES SPORTED A “STRIKING SAIL”

Remains unearthed on the Isle of Wight are from a new species of iguanodontian with long spines along its back that may have been used for displaying to potential mates



The sail-backed species weighed about one tonne, around the same size as an American bison

A team of scientists from the University of Portsmouth and London's Natural History Museum has identified a new species of dinosaur after re-examining 125-million-year-old fossils found on the Isle of Wight.

This is the third species of iguanodontian – a type of plant-eating reptile – found on the island in recent years. Unlike the other two, this new species exhibits elongated neural spines projecting up from the animal's vertebrae, likely supporting a “striking sail” along its back and tail. This may have been used in mating displays, say scientists involved in the study, published in August in *Papers in Palaeontology*.

Retired GP turned PhD student Dr Jeremy Lockwood, who identified the new species, named it *Istiorachis macarthurae* – the first part from ancient Greek meaning ‘sail spine’, the second a homage to British sailor Ellen MacArthur, who broke the world record for the fastest solo non-stop sailing trip around the world in 2005.

Lockwood made his discovery while examining fossils in the collections of the Dinosaur Isle Museum in Sandown, when he noticed differences from the previously identified iguanodontian species.

“While the skeleton wasn't as complete as some of the others that have been found, no one had really taken a close look at these bones before,” says Lockwood. “This one had particularly long neural spines, which was very unusual.”

These long spines, more than four times the height of the vertebral body in some instances, are believed to have supported a large sail. To get an idea of the purpose of such a sail, Lockwood and co-authors David Martill and Susannah Maidment compared the new species' backbones with those of other iguanodontians.

“We showed that *Istiorachis*' spines weren't just tall – they were more exaggerated than is usual in Iguanodon-like dinosaurs, which is exactly the kind of trait

you'd expect to evolve through sexual selection,” says Lockwood. “In modern reptiles, sail structures often show up more prominently in males, suggesting that these attributes evolved to impress mates or intimidate rivals. We think *Istiorachis* may have been doing much the same.”

The new discovery highlights a broad evolutionary trend in iguanodontians of increasingly elongated neural spines. The researchers found evidence to suggest that this trend started in the Late Jurassic epoch, and that elongated neural spines became relatively common features amongst iguanodontians in the following epoch, the Early Cretaceous.

Even in the context of this trend, the newly described species is remarkable for the hyper-elongation of those spines – a real rarity among others of its kind. More than other similar iguanodontians, it seems, *Istiorachis* was a born show-off.

Will Newton

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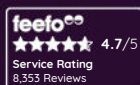
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In England, incidents of fly-tipping household waste rose by 6% in 2023/24

ENGLAND'S FLY-TIPPING HOTSPOTS REVEALED

Government figures identify the worst-affected areas as numbers of incidents rise

Fly-tipping is a persistent problem in the UK, having escalated during the Covid-19 pandemic and since. The latest set of annual Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) statistics for England reveals the huge impact on local councils, which are responsible for clearing small-scale fly-tipping on public land.

There were 1.15 million incidents of fly-tipping in England in 2023/24 – an increase of 6% from the previous 12-month period – although the true figure may be higher due to unreported incidents on private land. The highest number of incidents were in London, with 49.7 per 1,000 people. North-east England was second with 25.2, followed by the East Midlands with 19.2. Eight of the 10 top fly-tipping hotspots were in London.

More than a third of reported fly-tipping incidents – about 427,000 – were on highways; 218,000 (19%) were on footpaths and bridleways, with slightly fewer on council land.

WORST FLY-TIPPING AREAS

The following areas recorded the highest number of incidents in 2023/24.

Croydon, south London: 35,470 incidents. In 2024, Croydon Council spent around £1m on clearing fly-tipped waste.
Camden, north London: 34,786 incidents.
Hackney, east London: 33,464 incidents.
 Green spaces such as Hackney Marshes

can be prone to fly-tipping.

Nottingham: 30,511 incidents. The East Midlands city recorded the highest number of fly-tipping incidents outside London.

Lewisham, south-east London: 27,599 incidents.

Hounslow, west London: 27,241 incidents.

Brent, north-west London: 27,023 incidents. In April 2025, fly-tipping fines in the borough were raised by over 100%. More than 5,700 enforcement actions were taken in the previous 12 months, up from 2,700 the year before.

Westminster, central London: 25,531 incidents. In 2023, the local authority identified three fly-tipping hotspot areas where AI-powered CCTV was installed to identify suspected incidents.

Southwark, south London: 22,912 incidents.

Liverpool: 20,003 incidents. The Merseyside city reported the second-highest number of fly-tipping incidents outside London.

In June, Liverpool City Council, which spends £12 million each year on cleaning litter and fly-tipping, increased penalties for these offences. The fine for dropping litter rose from £80 to £150, while anyone fly-tipping up to three bags will be liable to a £500 fine; the penalty for tipping more than three bags (but less than a vanload) is £750. Larger loads attract a £1,000 fine.

Freya Parr

The Plodcast

Tune your ears into our podcast this month

7 October

Search for wallabies on the Isle of Man with environmental writer James Fair and discover how these antipodean marsupials escaped into the wild.

14 October

Wander the beaches, coves and sea caves of north Cornwall with landscape artist Sarah Adams – including a live sketch as the tide comes in.

21 October

Discussing the effects of walking at night on our emotions, physicality and imagination with Professor Andy Flack from Bristol University.

28 October

Exploring the evolution of gardening with the editor of *Gardens Illustrated* magazine Stephanie Mahon, with a gentle Plodcast in a Welsh woodland garden.



Our nature and countryside Plodcast is available on all podcast providers.
countryfile.com/podcast



The large white butterfly - sometimes called the cabbage white - has a wingspan range of 63-70mm

HOT SPRING AND SUMMER FAIL TO STEM BUTTERFLY DECLINE

Large whites top Butterfly Conservation's Big Butterfly Count results in 2025,
but their success isn't shared by most UK species

The results of Butterfly Conservation's Big Butterfly Count 2025 are in, revealing the long-term forecast for the survival of many of our much-loved summer insects is still gloomy.

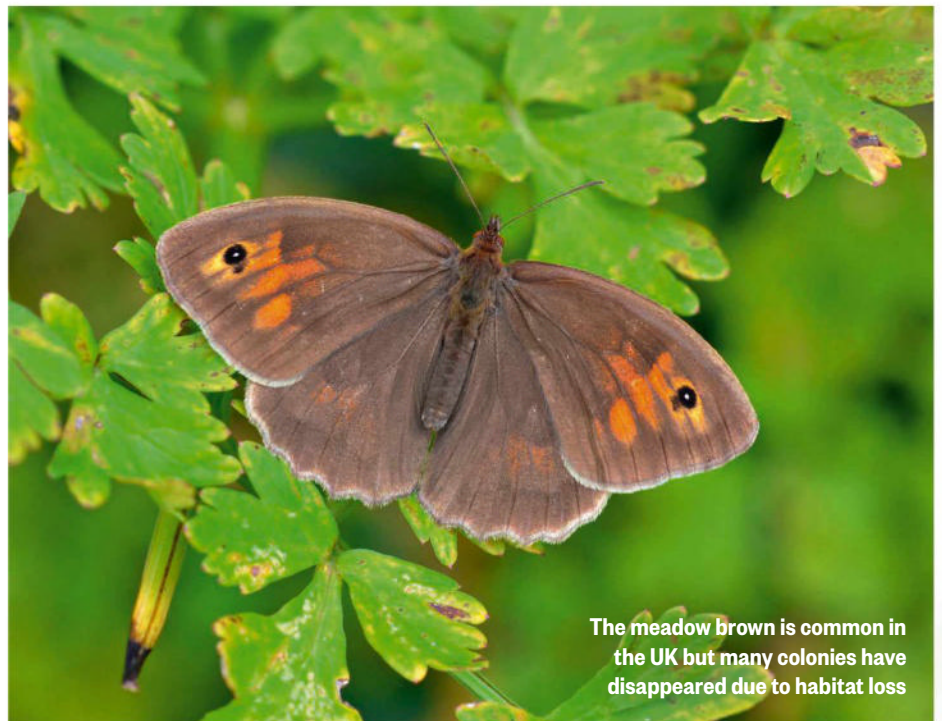
The sunniest spring and hottest summer ever recorded in the UK should have provided ideal conditions for butterflies and moths, but clement weather is only half the story. For successful breeding, unpolluted habitats are as crucial as warm, dry spells.

Butterflies are key indicators of biodiversity and environmental health. Tracking the numbers of butterflies nationwide helps Butterfly Conservation understand the impacts of climate change, habitat loss and any conservation action taken.

A total of nearly 1.7 million butterflies and moths were sighted during this year's Big Butterfly Count, with 125,000 citizen scientists (up from 85,000 in 2024) recording an average of 10.3 butterflies in every 15-minute session.

The average of 10.3 butterflies was a vast improvement on the average of just seven recorded in 2024, a year of record lows partially due to the cool spring and wet summer that were never going to favour warmth- and sun-loving butterflies. So bad, in fact, that Butterfly Conservation declared a 'butterfly emergency' after the results were revealed in September 2024. However, with Europe and North America also reporting long-term butterfly declines, this increase in 2025 doesn't reflect a bumper year or give reason for optimism.

Dr Richard Fox, head of science at Butterfly Conservation, says: "Whilst we've seen noticeably more butterflies during 2025's count, the figures suggest it's actually been a pretty average year for them by modern standards.



The meadow brown is common in the UK but many colonies have disappeared due to habitat loss

"The 15-year Big Butterfly Count trends show that more than twice as many widespread species have declined significantly than have increased. And, while most species had a better than average summer, one-third fared poorly, even in the generally beneficial weather."

Large white, small white, gatekeeper, red admiral and meadow brown were the top five species seen this year. However, of those, gatekeeper and meadow brown have declined by 22% and 18% respectively over the past 15 years. And these figures are eclipsed by the losses of small tortoiseshell, common blue and green-veined white that are down by 60%, 57% and 54% respectively, in the same timeframe.

The news was not all bad. The Jersey tiger moth had a record year in 2025, with

the species recorded more widely and in higher numbers. Small coppers and red admirals have also fared better than most since 2011. These small successes, though, do not negate the need for nationwide action to preserve the second element in butterfly requirements: healthy habitats in which to live and breed.

"There remains a need for us to take urgent action to support our butterfly populations," says Dr Fox, "including by improving the environment in which they live, restoring habitats and reducing pesticide use. Until we do these things we are unlikely to see a great recovery, regardless of how much the sun shines."

Next year's Big Butterfly Count will take place between 17 July and 9 August 2026.

Sheena Harvey

FOLKLORE FOCUS *October*



Boys in Hornsey, London, in October 1926 gather to enjoy a classic conker fight

A CHILDHOOD PASTIME GOES GLOBAL

The World Conker Championships has turned the traditional game of conkers into a serious and fiercely fought test of skill, writes **Pat Kinsella**

Beloved by schoolchildren for decades, the once-popular playground game of conkers has seemingly fallen from favour recently. This has been blamed on health-and-safety rules, but this is largely a myth. No one really knows why modern kids are less interested in playing conkers, but plenty of adults remain extremely enthusiastic about the traditional pursuit. Every autumn, gladiatorial conker contests take place, and there's even an annual World Conker Championships, held in Northamptonshire.

WHERE ARE CONKERS FROM?

Native to the Balkans, horse chestnut trees were introduced to Britain in the late 16th

century. Encased in a spiky pod, the tree's nuts are distinctive and attractive.

The Victorians invented a recipe for conker flour that leached out some of the bitterness, but the nuts taste bad and are poisonous to people, so don't try this at home. Many animals can safely scoff them though, including deer, cattle and horses (hence the name). It was once believed that feeding conkers to equines would make their coats as shiny as the nuts. According to an old wives' tale, conkers placed around the house ward away spiders, and during the First World War there was an attempt to use them as a source of starch and acetone, required for making cordite (an explosive).

But, as any big kid will tell you, by far the best use for conkers is to thread them onto a piece of string and smash them together until one explodes. A conker-like game was first referenced in 1821, when the Poet Laureate Robert Southey described contests played with snail shells and hazelnuts, but it wasn't until the mid-19th century that the horse chestnut became the weapon of choice in such battles.

WHERE IS THE NAME FROM?

The origin of the name is oblique. It possibly derives from conquer, or the French word conque (conch shell), from when the game was played with seashells. Others have



King Conker David Jakins
inspects the conkers at the
world championships in 2021

“THOUSANDS OF SPECTATORS WATCH HUNDREDS OF WARRIORS”

postulated it's onomatopoeic, evoking the sound of the nuts colliding. Regional variations include 'cheggars' (Lancaster), 'cobblers' (used in DH Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*) and 'obblyonkers'.

HOW DID IT BECOME A SPORT?

Initiated by a group of frustrated anglers, who'd been put off their fishing expedition by bad weather and were seeking an alternative sport, the Conker Championships began in 1965 at the Chequered Skipper pub in the village of Ashton, Northamptonshire. In 2013, the growing event relocated to the larger-capacity Shuckburgh Arms in Southwick, near Peterborough. Held on the second Sunday of October, the competition attracts thousands of spectators, who watch hundreds of warriors from the world over vying for the coveted titles of Conker King and Conker Queen.

Players from Mexico, Germany and France have been crowned as world champions, and the event has survived natural challenges (including droughts, disease, high winds and late frosts damaging the harvest) and controversy. In 2024, after accusations of cheating were

levelled, men's champion David Jakins was found with a painted steel conker in his pocket (he was subsequently cleared of wrongdoing). To date, the championships have raised £420,000 for charity.

WHAT ARE THE RULES?

There are many tips and tricks for toughening up prized conkers, from soaking them in vinegar to baking them in the oven. At the world championships, however, it's all about technique and skill, and competitors must use untampered-with conkers (and laces) supplied by organisers.

Battles begin with a coin toss, after which the person who correctly calls it chooses whether to strike first or second. A minimum of 20cm of lace must always be kept between knuckles and conker.

In contrast to traditional playground rules, 'stamps' (when a player can stamp on their opponent's conker if it's knocked to the ground) are not permitted. If a conker falls from the lace, but remains intact, it can be rethreaded. And if both conkers simultaneously smash, new nuts are drawn and battle recommences.

OTHER CONTESTS

At the Peckham Conker Championships, held annually at Brick Brewery in London, Battle Royale rules apply, so conkers can be toughened and 'stamps' are permitted.

For more on the world championship, visit worldconkerchampionships.com. For more about the London event, go to the event's website, peckhamconker.club.



OTHER EVENTS IN OCTOBER



OLD MAN'S DAY, BRAUGHING, HERTFORDSHIRE

On 2 October 1571, instead of getting married at Braughing's St Mary's church, farmer Matthew Wall was being taken to his funeral. En route, the pall bearers slipped. In the coffin, the very much alive occupant stirred from his coma and began frantic banging. Released, Wall married his sweetheart, had two children and lived for another 24 years. When he did die, Wall made provisions for the church bells to be rung every 2 October. braughing.org.uk/local-history/old-mans-day

PUNKIE NIGHT, HINTON ST GEORGE, SOMERSET

Celebrated on the last Thursday of October, Punkie Night sees children parade around with 'punkies' (Jack o' lanterns). The century-old tradition apparently began when Hinton's menfolk failed to return from the fair in nearby Chiselborough, and their wives carved lanterns from mangelwurzels (a local vegetable) and went looking for them. hintonstgeorge.org.uk/events/punkie-night-procession

SAMHUINN FIRE PARADE, EDINBURGH

This flame-lit Halloween-night parade and party in Holyrood Park is a traditional celebration of the Celtic New Year, which bids goodbye to the warmer months and welcomes winter in. The event features storytelling, fire dancing, drumming, acrobatics and theatre. (For more about Samhuinn/Samhain, see countryfile.com/halloween/what-is-samhain)

A CIRCLE OF STORIES

In his new novel, author **Ken Follett** breathes life into one of the greatest British mysteries: Stonehenge

Were you interested in history from a young age? What first sparked your interest in the past?

I hated history in school because it was boring – although I did read historical novels even then. Later, when I was writing spy stories, I realised that the story would be more interesting if the work of the spy was directly related to a real historical battle or war, and that's when I began to read military history, looking for moments when a spy changed, or could have changed, history.

What fascinates you about Stonehenge and the time period when it was built?

I'm inspired by the way ordinary people living humble lives can somehow rise above their circumstance and create something eternal. The medieval cathedrals are an example of this. Stonehenge is another.

You did extensive research for *Circle of Days*. Which experience during that process had the greatest impact on you?

I was very struck by the discovery that the people of the Stone Age dug mines in search of the best quality flint, which was used to make tools. The mines themselves (which you can see at Grimes Graves in Norfolk) are impressive, and they also indicate that the Stone Age must have had a trading system.

Do you have your own theories about how Stonehenge was built?

I do have my own theories. These are rooted in research and based on what archaeologists and experts believe must have happened, but no one really knows the truth. This means that there is a lot of scope for me to use my imagination to elaborate on what little is known based on historical record and



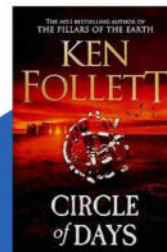
evidence. That's what makes Stonehenge such a fertile and fascinating subject for a novelist – it's a mystery.

What do you think motivated the people who created Stonehenge to take on such an enormous task?

There isn't a short answer to this question. However, it was the people who built Stonehenge who interested me the most and who are really the focus of the story. It cannot have been easy to build the monument – in fact, it must have been immensely difficult. Stonehenge predates the wheel and they didn't use animals to help transport heavy loads, so the stones must have been moved by sheer force of will and human effort. It's quite inspiring when you think about it, but it does make you wonder why they did it. For the long answer, you'll have to read the book. **CF**

For the latest Stonehenge research, see page 12.

ABOVE Ken Follett imagines the people behind the building of Stonehenge in his latest novel



Circle of Days by Ken Follett is published by Quercus (£25).

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Treacle tart

Sweet and comforting, Harry Potter's favourite pudding is a perfect example of culinary alchemy, says Neil Buttery

It's no accident that treacle tart is beloved at Hogwarts, where students enjoy the best of British foods. This economical, comforting pudding was a cornerstone of high tea across the country in the 19th and 20th centuries. At its simplest, it consists of a pastry case filled with a mixture of golden syrup and stale breadcrumbs, its tooth-aching sweetness tempered by a spoonful of black treacle, lemon zest, mixed spice and sometimes cream, butter or eggs.

The 'treacle' is confusing, since the main ingredient is golden syrup. However, black treacle and golden syrup are the only two extant treacles of a range that varied in colour from a pale straw to almost black. In 1861, Mrs Beeton wrote of treacle in her *Book of Household Management* that "children are especially fond of it; and it is accounted especially wholesome". In the 1930s, treacle tart was recommended by the British Medical Association as a perfect midweek dessert. This advice wouldn't hold up today, but don't let it stop you: everything in moderation, and all that.

Photo: Steve Sayers



Dr Neil Buttery is an author, blogger, podcaster and cook of British food from the past. His books include *Knead to Know: A History of Baking*.





How to make it

Makes one 26cm tart

2–3 tbsp cold water

SHORTCRUST PASTRY

100g salted butter,
diced

200g plain flour, plus
extra for rolling

50g caster or icing
sugar

1 egg, well beaten

FOR THE FILLING

450g golden syrup

225g fresh breadcrumbs

Extra flavourings:

1 tbsp black treacle,

1 tsp mixed spice, zest of
a lemon (all optional)

1. To make the pastry: in a bowl, rub the butter into the flour and sugar until the mix looks like breadcrumbs. Make a well in the centre, add the egg and mix with a butter knife, adding cold water to any dry patches. With your hand, form the mixture into a dough. Knead it briefly on a floured worktop, wrap in cling film and let it chill in the fridge for 20 minutes.

2. Roll the pastry into a round to the thickness of a pound coin on a lightly floured worktop. Let the pastry rest for two minutes, then line a 26cm fluted tart tin with it. Trim off excess pastry, prick the base with a fork and return it to the fridge for 30 minutes to firm.

3. Preheat your oven to 200°C/180°C fan and place a baking tray on the centre shelf. If you like, roll strips of

leftover pastry for making a lattice top.

4. Meanwhile, make the filling. Pour the golden syrup and black treacle (if using) into a saucepan and heat gently. Once hot and runny, add the remaining ingredients and mix everything thoroughly. Leave it to cool for 10 minutes.

5. Pour the mixture into the pastry case and place the pastry strips on top in a lattice pattern, if wished. Trim any extra pastry. Bake for 30–40 minutes, reducing the heat to 160°C/140°C fan after 15 minutes. It's ready when the filling is bubbling and pastry is golden brown. Allow it to cool to warm before removing from the tin. Serve with lashings of runny cream.

Treacle tart will keep for up to seven days in an airtight tub or tin.





Behind the lens, our overwhelming love for nature hasn't changed

At the southern end of the Yorkshire Dales lie the ruins of Bolton Abbey, ingrained in my memory since I first marvelled at them as a teenager on a family outing. Using my simple, very limited Kodak Brownie camera, I tried to capture their stark, destroyed beauty set amid a glorious landscape with the River Wharfe flowing past. The results didn't survive!

What a contrast, I thought, when I recently returned to Bolton Abbey so many years later, armed with some of the best pictures I've ever seen of the UK countryside, all taken by *Countryfile* viewers. They formed the shortlist from thousands of entries in our latest photographic competition, and the judging table had been set up in the priory (the only part of the abbey not knocked about by King Henry VIII).

The tough task facing Hamza Yassin and me, together with our special guest, astronomer Dame Maggie Aderin-Pocock, was to choose the top 12 that will each have a page in next year's *Countryfile Calendar*. For *The Sky at Night* presenter Dame Maggie, who spends her professional life studying the universe, it was a rare chance to focus on the wildlife in one small corner of Earth. After a day of lively debate, with each of us chipping in on every entry, we finally had our dozen. You can see the overall winners and the new calendar on *Countryfile* on 12 October.

The competition began in 1991, three years after *Countryfile* first hit the airwaves. Since then, over half a million pictures have been sent in. It came about because viewers began posting us, unprompted, photos they had

taken while out in the countryside. A decision was made to harness our audience's talent for capturing the magic of the UK outdoors.

The competition became so popular that we were soon dealing with sackfuls of entries and calling on expert photographers, such as Fay Godwin and Patrick Lichfield, to select the best. Then, in a live episode, viewers were invited to vote by phone for their own favourites.

“THE COMPETITION HAD BECOME A VITAL EXTENSION OF THE PROGRAMME”

A secret I didn't know until years later was that its success helped save *Countryfile* from the axe. A former executive told me that BBC bosses had considered either decommissioning the show or drastically reducing the number of episodes to save money. However, the competition had become a vital extension of the programme, adding to *Countryfile*'s public profile and making it hard to kill off. Saving the show was a wise decision, because today, *Countryfile* is often among the weekly top 20 of most-watched television programmes and the competition is still one of its highlights.

In 1998 came a big transformation: the winning photos wouldn't just vanish into the ether when the live show was over. Instead, they would be on display for a whole year in the nation's homes in the form of a *Countryfile* calendar, to be sold in aid of BBC Children in Need.

So a new challenge faced our trusty army of snappers: they needed to focus on images that would look good for a month on a kitchen wall, while still fulfilling the theme we set every year.

As the competition evolved over the years, so did the way people took their pictures. In the early days, entries had been on film and some photographers seemed to think (wrongly) that the bigger the print, the better their chance of winning. Then came the photo revolution with traditional cameras giving way to digital and smartphones and tablets coming to the fore. Now we only accept images – and votes – online.

I've been involved since day one and, though the quality has always been high, it just keeps getting better. More thought is given to composition, phone cameras can readily catch incredible 'moment in time' images and, though there will always be hundreds of endearing robin, puffin and red squirrel pictures, many of them are now taken from more imaginative angles. But what hasn't changed is the overwhelming love behind the lens for the countryside and its creatures.

Who could have guessed that a few snapshots sent in 30-odd years ago would lead to a huge photographic competition and best-selling calendar? What makes me swell with pride, on behalf of everyone who sends in their photos each year, is the spectacular total of £33m that the calendar has raised for BBC Children in Need. And I'll be even prouder when the 2026 calendar pushes that total higher. ☺



Watch John Craven and the team on *Countryfile*, Sunday evenings on BBC One.



COUNTRYFILE Calendar winner revealed

Find out which of these 12 stunning images of nature and landscape won the public vote

Tune in to *Countryfile* on BBC One on Sunday 12 October for the reveal of the overall winner of 2025's prestigious *Countryfile* Photographic Competition.

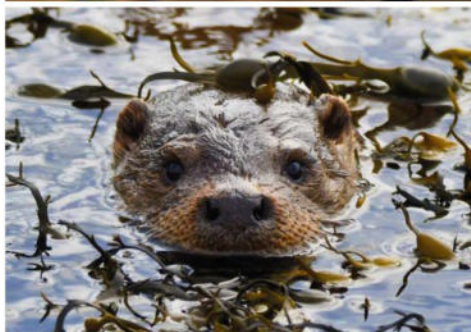
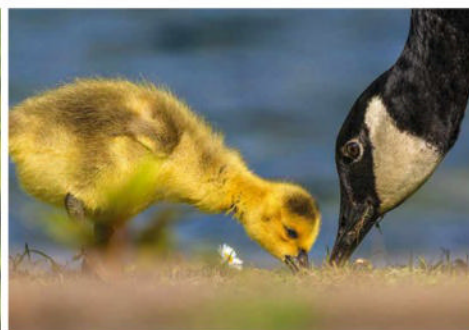
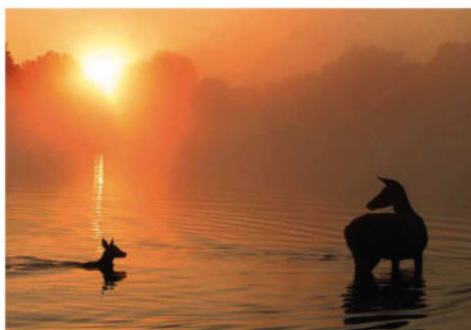
This year's three judges – presenters John Craven and Hamza Yassin with scientist Dame Maggie Aderin-Pocock –

picked their 12 favourite images, which will all feature in the *Countryfile* Calendar for 2026. The 12 photographs were published on 31 August, and the public voted for the overall winner in early September.

Proceeds from sales of the calendar go to the charity BBC Children in Need, which

funds vital support for children struggling with challenges caused by mental health, poverty, social inequality and family-related issues. Over £33 million has been raised since the calendar launched in 1998.

Find out how to order your calendar at hcscaleNDAR.co.uk.





A VIEW FROM THE FARM

A powerful technological revolution in farming is underway

Your starter for 10 – can you name a highly computerised and technically advanced vehicle currently on sale in the UK?

If your answer is a Tesla, BMW or another futuristic electric vehicle packed with in-car infotainment, parking cameras and digital mirrors then you're probably in the majority. But you could just have easily suggested the latest tractor or combine harvester and scored top marks. Modern farming requires the best machinery for the job, and it might surprise you how much has changed inside the average agricultural vehicle in recent years.

There's a big debate about self-driving cars and at what point they will be allowed on public roads in this country. But how many people know that driverless tractors are being used on British farms? Steered by GPS, the satellite navigation system used to track mobile phones, they are a game-changer in the way we produce food. Harper Adams University in Shropshire achieved a world first when researchers successfully planted, tended and harvested a crop using only drones and automated vehicles.

A field of spring barley was followed the next year by winter wheat in a project named Hands Free Hectare. An autonomous tractor sowed and sprayed the crops, soil samples were taken by small rovers looking like something from the moon landings, while the growth of the cereals was monitored by camera-drones flying overhead. Finally, an unmanned combine worked back and forth to



Freddie the FarmDroid sowed an entire field of beets on a farm near Ross-on-Wye this year

“DRIVERLESS TRACTORS ARE LIGHTER AND KINDER TO THE SOIL”

harvest the crop. And if you think this is the stuff of science fiction, the idea was conceived exactly 10 years ago.

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean that every farm vehicle today is equipped like the space shuttle; the cost of the newest kit will always price some people out. At anything up to £320,000 for an autonomous farm vehicle, affordability is an issue for now. But what about sustainability? Despite features such as radar, ultrasound and sensors that stop the vehicle if it detects an obstacle, driverless tractors are about half the size of conventional ones as well as lighter and, therefore, kinder to the soil.

The new agricultural revolution is taking place elsewhere on farms too,

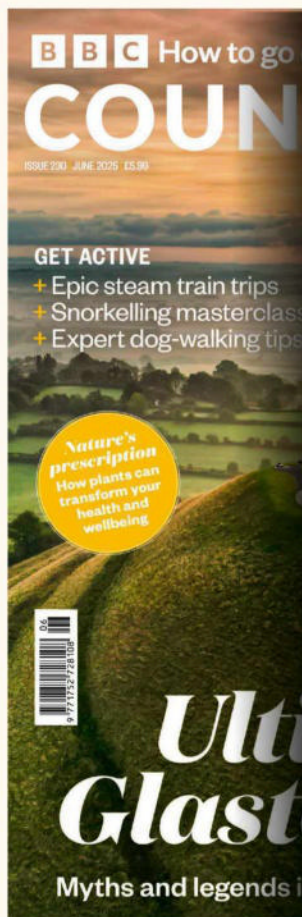
which are a hotbed of technical innovation and efficiency. Robots that are able to plant, spray and pick are being used or trialled at the moment. In Herefordshire, a solar-powered sugar beet-seeder and -weeder has been working the fields on Ally Hunter Blair's tenanted family farm near Ross-on-Wye. The machine has been nicknamed Freddie the FarmDroid. It not only sowed an entire field this spring but it also GPS-marked every beet in the ground so that the specialist blade could cut all the weeds between each row and around every individual plant.

Do all these marvellous machines have the charm of the old-fashioned sit-up-and-beg tractors? I don't think the popularity of vintage tractor parades of little grey Fergies and classic Fordsons is under any threat.

So, what's next? The team behind Hands Free Hectare is already speculating on what emerging technologies might be able to achieve in the future. Instead of automated tractors and combines, could we soon be sowing and harvesting crops with a swarm of AI-enabled pilotless drones? Our daily bread produced without a wheel on the ground. It's tantalising to think that one day even a GPS-steered driverless tractor could be classed as ancient farm machinery. **CF**

“Have your say What do you think about the issues raised here? Write to the address on page four or email editor@countryfile.com

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St Mary's Church in Dedham was one of John Constable's favourite subjects to paint and is also home to *The Ascension*, one of only a handful of religious-themed works by the artist



DISCOVER
Constable
COUNTRY

Few artists are as synonymous with a place as John Constable. Ahead of a major Tate Britain exhibition marking 250 years since his birth, **Ben Lerwill** ventures to the open skies and slow waters of the idyllic Essex-Suffolk border

Photos: Peter Flude

Willy Lott's House in Flatford was immortalised by Constable in *The Hay Wain* and several other paintings



I've wandered into an oil painting. In front of me is a millpond with a cream-coloured cottage at its edge and a froth of English greenery on its banks. The scene is unmistakable. Where my mind's eye sees carthorses and a wooden wagon there's now nothing but damselflies and duckweed, but the view still has a potent familiarity.

It's John Constable's early 19th-century masterpiece *The Hay Wain* – the star of an uncountable number of tea towels, jigsaw puzzles and biscuit tins – and I'm standing right inside it.

Few landscape artists are as synonymous with a specific region as Constable. Many of his best-known

works were painted within walking distance of Flatford Mill, the scene of *The Hay Wain* and one of three local mills once owned by his family on the Essex-Suffolk border. His canvases

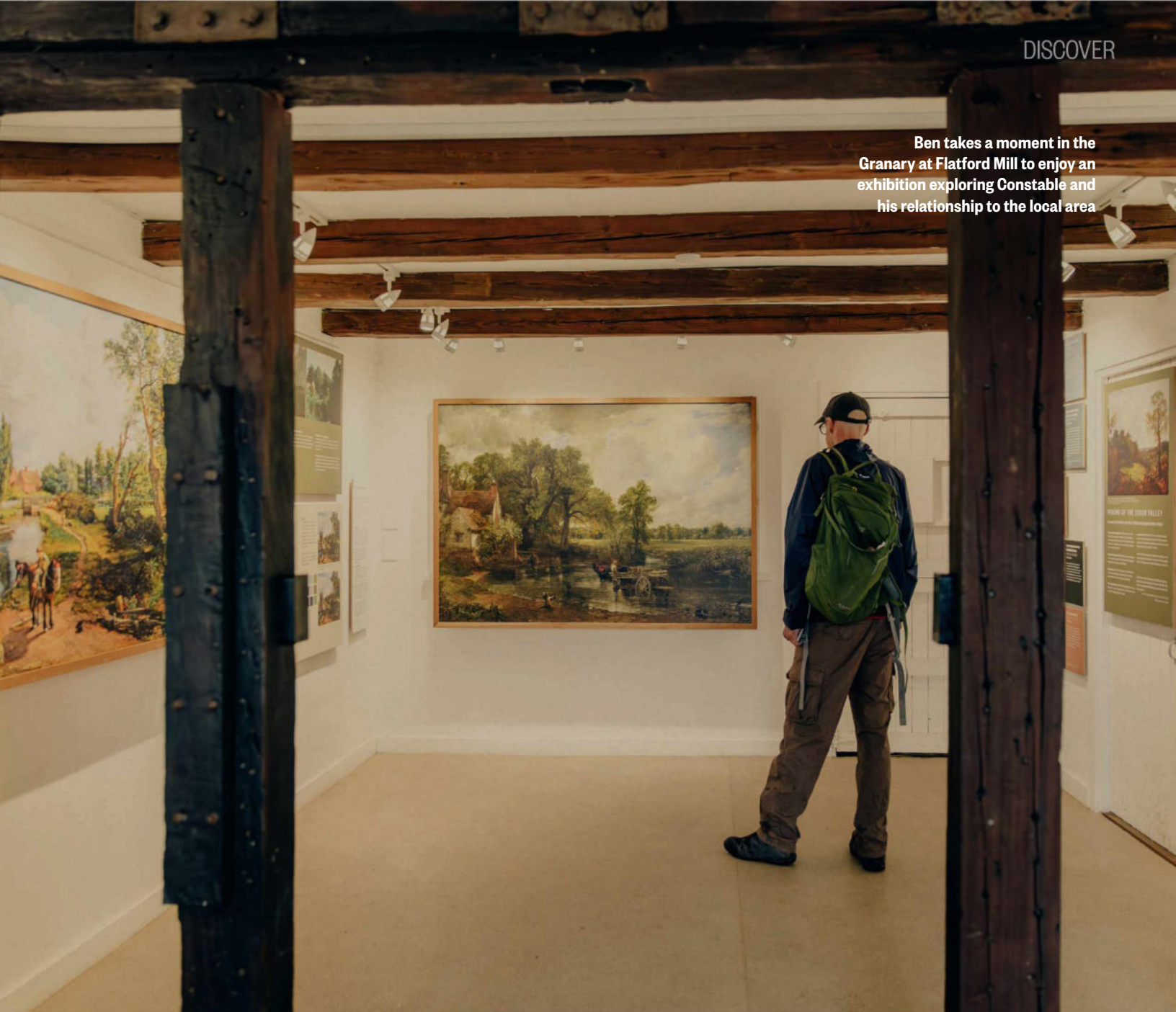
“Constable's canvases sing with open skies”

sing with open skies, mighty elms and slow waters, his colours seeming to capture a countryside stuck in time. Yet there's a dramatic undertow to these grand bucolic scenes: labourers toil, reflections ripple, clouds gather.

“He's renowned as a painter of idyllic England, but I bet the air round here would have been blue!” says Ilona, one of the volunteer guides at Flatford Mill, holding up a reprint of Constable's 1822 work *View on the Stour near Dedham*. It shows men hefting barges into position beyond Flatford Bridge; behind her, the same waterway and bridge are instantly recognisable. “This was hard manual work. And it was a troubled time in Britain, remember, after the loss of the American colonies and the Napoleonic blockades.”

Constable tended to give his works rather anodyne titles – *Scene on a Navigable River*, for example, or *A Boat Passing A Lock* – but this belies the stories they hold of industry, rural life

Ben takes a moment in the Granary at Flatford Mill to enjoy an exhibition exploring Constable and his relationship to the local area



The River Stour gently wends its way through Constable Country



“His paintings hold stories of industry, rural life and a changing world”

and a changing world. Late November 2025 sees the opening of a landmark five-month exhibition at London's Tate Britain Gallery, focusing on his artistic rivalry with another legendary painter, JMW Turner. Both Turner and Constable were born around 250 years ago, in April 1775 and June 1776 respectively. As an exhibition, the word epic comes to mind.

I've come to Constable Country – the name given to the area of the Dedham Vale National Landscape where the artist grew up, and which inspired so

much of his work – to wander. A small web of linked walking trails threads across the landscape here, none of which are especially long but all of which give the chance not just to find out more about Constable himself, but to enjoy the unhurried, peaceable Stour Valley. Let the waterside strolls and tearoom stops commence.

DIFFERENT PATHS

John Constable was, in many ways, a lucky man. Born into middle-class comfort in the village of East





Bergholt (barely a mile from Flatford as the cloud drifts), he trained to become a miller until his love of painting steered him on another path. He entered London's Royal Academy in 1799 at the age of 23 – Turner, by contrast, had done the same at 13 – and began to make his way in the art world.

I begin my decidedly more modest journey at Manningtree Station, where an oaky green footpath leads me away from the bustle of passengers arriving from Liverpool Street. Within minutes, I'm walking among a lazy tangle of blackberries and dappled sunlight. Soon the path reaches the low-lying Cattawade Marshes. Canada geese are grazing on the open flats and a warm breeze shuffles the reeds. The railway line is still only a few hundred feet away but already the views are wide and gentle, framed by teasels and banks of cow parsley.

Manningtree Station wasn't opened until 1846, almost a decade after Constable's death in 1837, but it has a part to play in the valley's story. The

“Already the views are wide and gentle”



Rowers on the River Stour at Dedham enjoy a glide past cattle-grazed water meadows

Stour was the first river in the country to be made navigable, its flow having been regulated with sluices and lock gates to allow London-bound cargos of grain, malt, bricks and more to be hauled inland by horse-drawn barges. When the age of the train arrived, trade on the Stour was badly hit.

It's this pre-railway river – or, strictly speaking, canal – that so often appears in Constable's work. His paintings can appear sleepy at first glance, but he's also depicting a place of physical exertion, of boatbuilders, sweating horses and trammelled towpaths. Before long I'm walking next to the water myself, watching giant dragonflies zip across the surface and dabbling mallards go bottoms-up in the green shallows. By the time I reach Flatford, with its cottages, mill buildings and cake-abundant café, I've only covered a couple of miles.

SAME AS IT EVER WAS

Constable initially struggled to find attention in London, but it was his

"I associate my 'careless' boyhood to all that lies on the banks of the Stour," said Constable. "Those scenes made a painter."



Ducks and dragonflies add to the bucolic scenes on Ben's stroll

now-famous larger canvases, the so-called "six footers", that brought him success. Based primarily in the capital, he was in the habit of spending the summer months back in the countryside of his childhood, where he would make extensive sketches and studies. These then formed the basis of his enormous paintings, which he created in his London studio over winter and spring. It was a long process, but it worked. And in the Stour Valley, he had a fruitful subject matter.

It's very easy to linger at Flatford, as generations of visitors have discovered. The travel company Thomas Cook & Son began running Constable Country tours as long ago as 1893, and despite an amusingly grumpy article in *The Times* in the 1920s ("You make your way to the bridge, wondering if you can spot just where he sat to paint the Mill and what changes it will show after all these years, and you come upon a tent marked TEAS AND ICES"), the experience of arriving at Flatford today is a well-preserved one.



The Oranges & Lemons Café in East Bergholt, the village where Constable was born

The vegetation has changed – elms succumbing to disease, sycamores grown mighty, oak and ash filling the views as they're no longer being chopped for boat timber – but the mill, the bridge and the course of the River Stour itself are much as they always were. Later in the day, I pass a few wild swimmers and slow-paddling kayakers

as I wend my way towards Dedham, following a truly lovely stretch of river that meanders through broad, cattle-cropped water meadows.

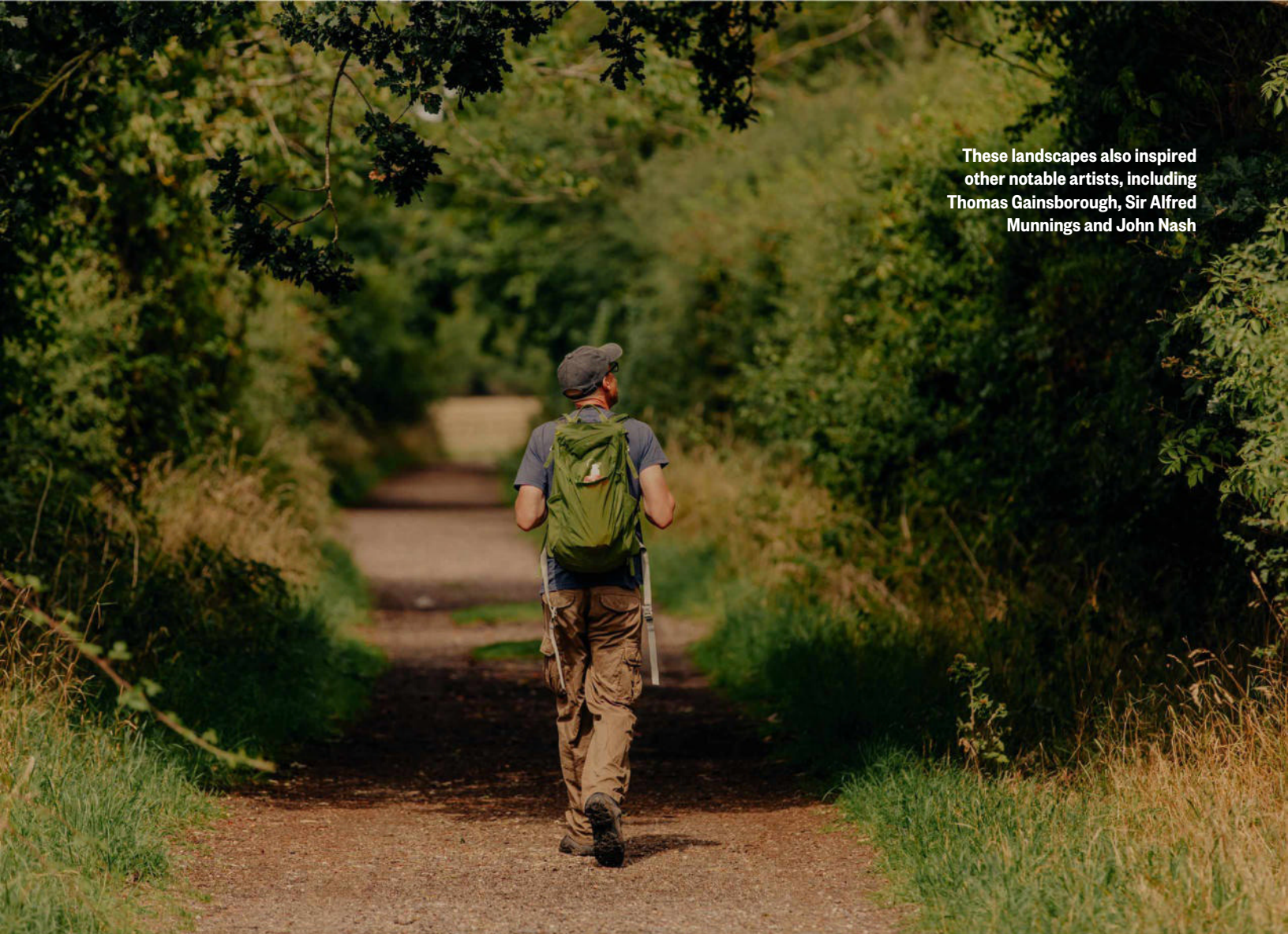
"No sharks around, then?" smiles a kayaker as she passes a swimmer. The serenity of the scene, with willows dangling into the water and martins swooping over the banks, makes the joke even more ludicrous.

STEPPING BACK IN TIME

At Fen Bridge, an expertly rebuilt version of the wooden footbridge that Constable himself used in his school days, a 100-strong herd of cattle has come to the water to drink. In the late-afternoon sun, the colours of their coats are rendered sharp – cream, chestnut, jet-black, butterscotch – and the sight feels like a view of an older world. Turner may have been the master of turbulent storms and oceans, but Constable's milieu was a bucolic one, and it carried the scents of cut hay, barge stoves and livestock.

The square tower of 15th-century St Mary's Church was a regular feature in Constable's paintings, although he often took artistic licence with its location





These landscapes also inspired other notable artists, including Thomas Gainsborough, Sir Alfred Munnings and John Nash

The village of Dedham proves a restful overnight base, with the historical Sun Inn a fine place to eat and sleep well. The high street holds ivied mansions, a Co-op with a vintage façade and the looming 16th-century tower of St Mary's Church, which appeared in the background of multiple Constable paintings, though not always where it should have done. "He liked to place the church tower where it worked best for the composition," Ilona had shared with me during her Flatford tour. "Perhaps it was on castors."

RIPE FOR A PLOUGHMAN'S

I spend the next day following other short local trails, heading north into the mellow hills to reach East Bergholt, where the valley views spill open and the site of Constable's now-vanished childhood home is marked by a plaque. I then wind west through shaggy river pastures to Stratford St Mary and Langham, another village immortalised on his canvases. The

path hops between Suffolk and Essex at will, crossing the rude presence of the A12 but otherwise serving up immersive country walking.

When I reach an onion field – its bulbs seemingly ripe enough to be served up in a Ploughman's lunch there and then – I realise it's the first arable crop I've come across. The riverine landscapes

"The path hops between Suffolk and Essex at will"

here are mainly soft and uncultivated, the kind where you find yourself choosing a patch of grass to sit on, before gazing at the Stour and marvelling at how Constable depicted it with such vivid watery realism.

His opinion of Turner was based on admiration as well as rivalry. He described his contemporary as "stark

mad with ability", remarking that Turner "seems to paint with tinted steam". But Constable himself was blessed with transcendent gifts of his own, capturing light, scale and accuracy of colour in a way that was unparalleled at the time.

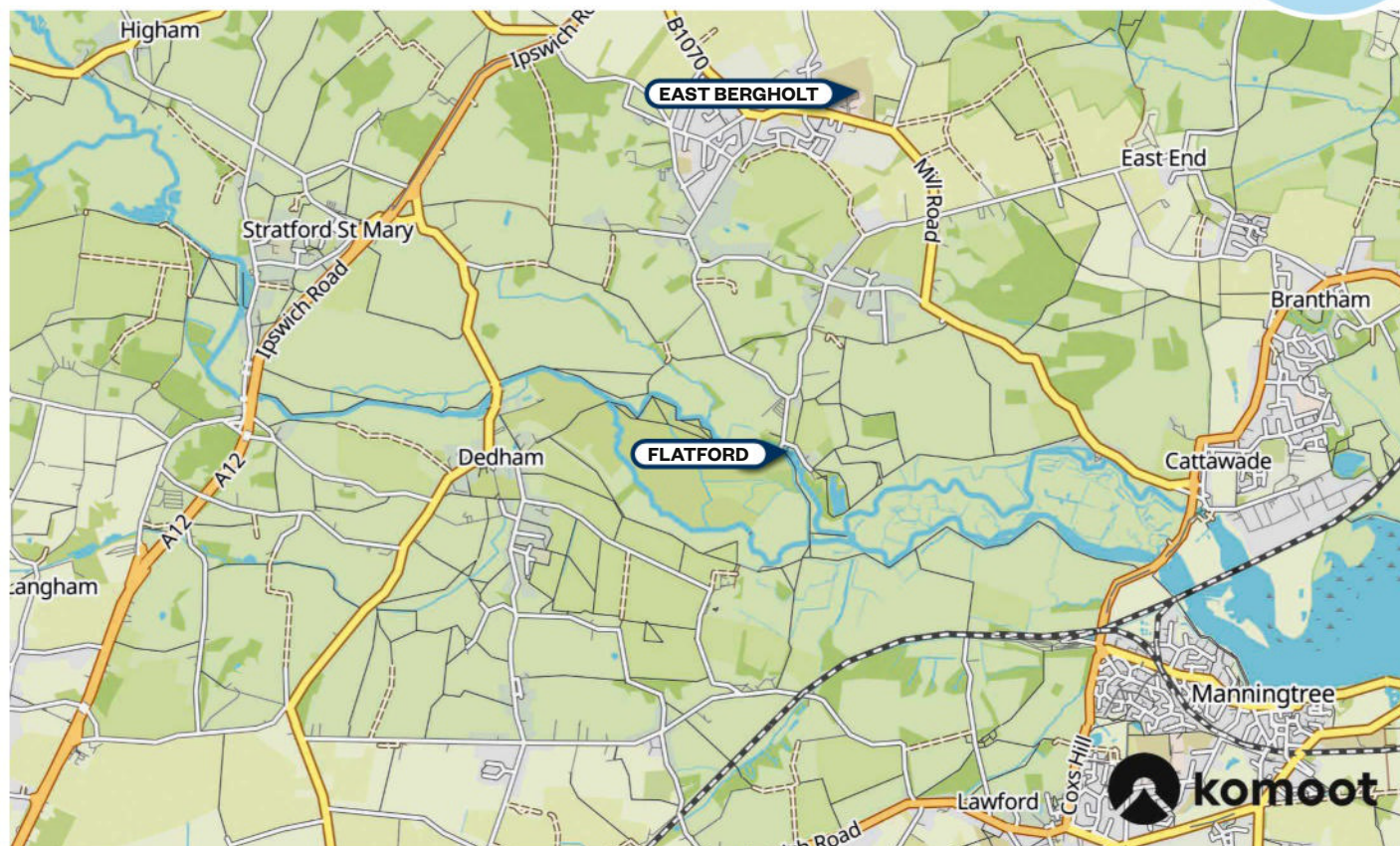
A walking break in Constable Country is not strenuous – there are no mountains here or roiling seas. The key footpaths, all told, cover only around 11 miles, but they lead you through a tranquil pocket of England that is largely unspoiled and – thanks to its artistic heritage – frequently fascinating. The Tate exhibition, bringing together two titans of the age, is likely to be just as absorbing. 



Ben Lerwill is an award-winning writer based in Oxfordshire who writes about the outdoors, wildlife, hiking, rail journeys, cycling, sustainable travel, sport, music, history and food. benlerwill.com

NOW GO THERE

Ben Lerwill on where to eat, stay and visit in Constable Country



GETTING THERE

The nearest station is Manningtree, on the Great Eastern Main Line, which is around 1 hour 15 minutes from London Liverpool Street and is also reachable from Colchester and Ipswich. If coming by car, Dedham and Flatford are around an hour's drive from either Junction 28 of the M25 or Junction 8 of the M11.

ACCOMMODATION

► THE SUN INN

A welcoming, characterful pub with rooms in the heart of Dedham. Dating back to at least the 17th century, it has Michelin-recommended cooking (think Modern British with European influences), seven carefully appointed en suite guestrooms and a plum location on the village's picturesque high street. The a la carte breakfast – complete with homemade jams – is a very enjoyable way to start the day. There are bikes available for guests, if the fancy takes you.

thesuninndedham.com

FSC FLATFORD MILL

This well-priced, hostel-style accommodation could have no better situation, being based inside Flatford Mill. It's run by the Field Studies Council and offers a mix of family rooms, singles, twins and dormitories.



The Sun Inn is in the heart of Dedham

Perks include a bar, a shared garden and free wifi. **fsc.inn.fan**

MILSOMS

A country house-style hotel based just off the A12 near Langham, with the

river nearby. It has 15 bedrooms – either standard, superior or deluxe – as well as a restaurant with indoor and outdoor dining. The hotel has four electric vehicle chargers. **milsomhotels.com/milsoms**



KEY LANDMARK

Managed by the National Trust, Flatford is the undisputed centrepiece of

Constable Country, home to Willy Lott's House (as seen in *The Hay Wain*), Flatford Bridge and Flatford Mill itself. A shop and two small exhibitions give further context, and there's also a wildlife garden on site. **nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/suffolk/flatford**



Grab a bite to eat at the Boatyard after hiring a traditional boat for a row on the River Stour

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

OLD BAKERY CAFÉ

Set on Dedham High Street, this is a great little family-run village café with beamed ceilings, speciality coffee (roasted in nearby Bury St Edmunds) and tasty meal options for both breakfast and lunch, with freshly baked cakes and pastries also available. Open every day except Sunday, and dogs are welcome.
oldbakerycafe.com

➤ FLATFORD TEA ROOM

Sitting within the Flatford Mill complex – but tastefully incorporated – this National Trust café serves quality tearoom fare, offering homemade scones, biscuits and cakes (try the rhubarb flapjack), sandwiches, sausage rolls and local Adnams beers and ales, among much else. There's also an extensive riverside garden

www.countryfile.com

with tables outside. **nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/suffolk/flatford**

ORANGES & LEMONS

A café and gift shop set in a former pub in East Bergholt, close to the turn-off to reach Flatford. Expect crafts, jewellery, cards and more, alongside breakfast, lunch and cake menus. Takeaway salads, paninis and baguettes are on offer too.
orangesandlemonscafe.com

▲ BOATYARD DEDHAM

A daytime restaurant on the banks of the River Stour, open from Wednesday to Sunday and serving food until 3pm. There's a deli counter with daily quiches and fresh pastries, as well as open sandwiches, burgers and salads. Teas, coffees, cakes and even "brunch cocktails" are also on offer. As its name suggests, it's also a good place for boat hire.
theboatyarddedham.co.uk

CARRIERS ARMS

Situated around half a mile from the site of Constable's childhood home in East Bergholt, this is a village pub with a good reputation. It's set in a Grade II-listed building and has an open fire, a garden, local ales and the usual range of pub meals.
thecarriersarms.co.uk

FURTHER INFORMATION

You'll find a good guide to walking routes around the region – including those described in the feature – at **dedhamvale-nl.org.uk**.

Turner & Constable: Art, Life, Landscape (2025, Yale University Press) by Nicola Moorby is a book studying the two artists, their differences and their similarities.

Tate Britain's 'Turner and Constable' exhibition runs from 27 November to 12 April 2026 in London. **tate.org.uk**



Flatford Tea Room
boasts riverside views

A full-page photograph of author Ian McEwan sitting on a stone wall in a lush green garden. He is wearing a light-colored fedora, a grey button-down shirt, and dark trousers. He is smiling and has his hands resting on a black and white Border collie dog, Rab, who is sitting on the grass in front of him. The background shows rolling green hills under a blue sky with light clouds.

Author Ian McEwan in his
Cotswold garden with his
late Border collie Rab



The art of nature

Ian McEwan's lifelong respect for nature shapes his poignant new novel *What We Can Know*. In a rare interview, the author discusses nature's vulnerability, beauty and resilience – and his hope for the future

Words: Mark Bailey Photos: Steve Sayers

Ian McEwan is strolling through the garden of his Cotswolds manor house. Bees waft drowsily between wildflowers. Plump apples, pears and walnuts bauble the trees. Vibrant cerulean-blue damselflies hover over the lake, like flecks of paint chipped from the vaulted fresco of summer sky. Framed by limestone hills and forests of oak, beech and ash, it is a scene of aching beauty – the kind that thrills the heart – but, inevitably, in the shadow of climate change, invites haunting reflections on loss.

This dance between wonder and fear shapes McEwan's new novel, *What We Can Know*, in which environmental catastrophe has left much of the UK submerged by tides, with three quarters of species lost.

"Those Joni Mitchell lyrics, 'You don't know what you've got till it's gone,' should be our warning motto," says McEwan. "Somebody ought to translate it into Latin, and have it emblazoned under every national flag."

McEwan's urge to confront topical issues, from euthanasia and artificial

intelligence to climate change, has earned him the moniker 'Britain's national novelist'. The 77-year-old has penned 18 critically acclaimed novels, including *Amsterdam*, *Atonement*, *Saturday*, *On Chesil Beach* and *Lessons*. Many have been adapted into movies, notably the Oscar-winning *Atonement*, starring Keira Knightley and James McAvoy. McEwan was made a Companion of Honour by King Charles in 2023.

When not writing, the 77-year-old McEwan can be found exploring the natural world, both physically and intellectually. He relishes long hikes along ridgelines, chalk tracks and footpaths. He enjoys vicarious adventures through the honeyed words of Patrick Leigh Fermor, Robert Macfarlane and William Wordsworth.

"I think Wordsworth really did change human consciousness in relation to landscape and nature," says McEwan. "What people saw as chaos, in time became beautiful."

The novelist also admires scientists, such as naturalist Charles Darwin and American biologist EO Wilson, who

“Given the opportunity, nature flourishes”

have illuminated nature’s secrets. “Wilson’s sumptuous descriptions of the Amazon’s dense, intricately related ecosystem made a colossal impression on me,” he insists.

Blessed with 3.6 hectares of land, McEwan is doing his bit to preserve the natural world he cherishes. He and his wife Annalena McAfee, a fellow writer, formed the lake here by linking four natural springs. “I go out at night in March and I see 200–300 frogs sitting on the bank,” he says. “There are ducks and newts. And the lake heaves with dragonflies. That readiness of nature to thrive when we just give it a chance is something I’ve seen in microcosm. And if I have any optimism about the future, it’s not that we have to do much good, we just have to stop doing bad things.”

Unfortunately, otters gobbled up the trout in his lake, and Canada geese scared away the ducks. But the triumphs have been spellbinding.

“The consequences of planting wildflowers for insects have been amazing,” says McEwan. The native alder, hawthorn and rowan he planted are thriving, and the apple trees are prolific. “We used to make cider, but no one drank it,” he sighs. “So we made apple juice instead.”

LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY

In the cool of his stone-walled sitting room, McEwan explains how landscapes moulded him from a young age. Born in Aldershot in 1948 to David McEwan, an itinerant Army officer, and Rose (née Wort), a housewife, he spent many childhood years in Libya, enjoying thrilling desert adventures. But aged 11, he was sent to Woolverstone Hall, a state boarding school in Suffolk, and beneath those vast East Anglian skies his nascent love of literature and landscape merged.



“We share genes with an iceberg lettuce and an oak tree”

“I love those muddy tidal estuaries: the River Orwell, around Orford Ness and up the Suffolk coast are glorious,” he says. “When I turned 16, about the time I was reading poetry, that landscape, rich in oak trees, big sycamores and tidal rivers, had a big effect on me... That was my awakening to the idea of heading off exploring.”

In adulthood, McEwan has hiked everywhere from America to the Arctic, but he also treasures local rambles. “Those paths in the Chiltern Hills with beech masts underfoot are a wonderful delight,” he says. “There is a particular kind of green of a beech wood in May that I don’t see anywhere else.” He was often joined on hikes by his loyal Border collie Rab, who sadly passed away weeks after this interview.

As a novelist, McEwan values the freewheeling thoughts and precise observation to detail that walks in nature inspire. But there is something deeper at play. He likes EO Wilson’s term ‘biophilia’, which describes humankind’s ancestral, genetically



Journalist Mark Bailey explores the garden with Ian McEwan, discussing the natural world and McEwan’s new book, *What We Can Know*



A meadow brown butterfly
perches on knapweed

encoded love for landscapes, plants and animals.

"I think it is the dissolving of your own personality and your own concerns," explains McEwan. "Just to be on this marvellous, fertile blue rock. And in that dissolving of everyday concerns is a sense that every living thing is related. We share genes with an iceberg lettuce and an oak tree. It is that lightening of the burden of the self."

This urge to dissolve into nature, which feels both liberating and edifying, may explain why McEwan is drawn to empty landscapes. American naturalist Henry David Thoreau memorably described the human need to "shake off the village".

"I have hiked on the far western side of the Lake District, from the River Esk, and I only saw one person," says McEwan. "And I admire those empty beaches of north-west Scotland, surrounded by granite, closely cropped grass and machair. The plankton-filled sea reminds one of the untouched bits

of the Caribbean – that glowing ultramarine that is so beautiful."

Wild places also nourish him with hope. "Given the opportunity, nature flourishes with a speed that astonishes," he says. "Just off the Isle of Arran, there's a patch of ocean, 100 square miles, where no fishing is permitted [a Marine Protected Area] and it's teeming with plants, sea grasses, kelp. Life just comes back..."

THE LOST WORLD

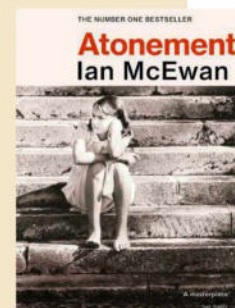
McEwan's reflections on the beauty, vulnerability and resilience of nature are evident in *What We Can Know*, which he calls "science fiction without the science". The novel begins in 2119, when climate change and nuclear catastrophe have reduced the UK to a partly submerged archipelago – still civilised but fractured and diminished. London is underwater. Libraries survive on mountain tops. Bird and animal populations are depleted. People are haunted by the beauty of the lost world – our world – when

THE BEST OF IAN MCEWAN



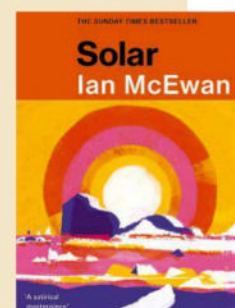
ATONEMENT (2001)

McEwan's most celebrated novel is about forbidden love, injustice and redemption in the war-torn 1930–40s. Featuring luscious descriptions of English nature, the book was adapted into a movie in 2007, starring Keira Knightley and James McAvoy.



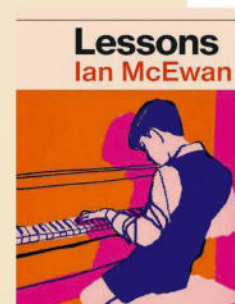
SOLAR (2010)

McEwan's first novel to tussle with climate change, *Solar* traces the life of a boorish Nobel Prize-winning physicist. A darkly comic dissection of human nature, it reminds us that climate change, however urgent, must be solved by flawed humans.



LESSONS (2022)

McEwan's most autobiographical book, *Lessons* follows his alter ego Roland Baines through a life of trauma and regret. The novel is enriched by vivid portrayals of landscapes drawn from McEwan's own life, from Libya to Suffolk.





Immersion in nature offers “a lightening of the burden of the self”, says McEwan

“We are wedged between the dead and the unborn”

the clouds of butterflies. I was reading Hardy recently, and looking at maps to see where his character was going, and I realised that she was walking on a chalk lane which is now the A34... But there are still chalk lanes around. And they are absolutely stunningly beautiful.”

The time jump in the novel is especially chilling. First, confronting the envy and contempt of future generations (Tom romanticises our world, while his students regard us as “destructive louts” who poisoned oceans and razed forests) leaves the reader twitching uncomfortably. “These are our great-grandchildren,” warns McEwan. Then, made aware of the horrors to come, when we return to our present era, the background hum of heatwaves and floods attains a sinister new power.

Far from a dystopia, however, the novel forces us to look closer at what we still have. Just as McEwan pines for the landscapes of Hardy, future generations may crave the broken yet beautiful world in which McEwan hikes today. “That’s why I included a passage about if John Clare [poet, born 1793] came forward 100 years to Edwardian Britain, he’d be shocked by the intrusion of roads, railways, horse dung, industrial smoke and factories,” says McEwan. “Whereas if we were transported back to Edwardian Britain, we’d be delighted by the landscapes.”

This intricate conversation between the past, the present and the future invites us to expand our own temporal horizons – surely the key to any global environmental salvation. McEwan was deeply inspired by the Long Now Foundation, an American non-profit which encourages longer-term thinking by archiving human skills, ideas and languages, and nudging us to become “good ancestors”.

people could hike for miles over dry land and eat oranges in December.

The novel traces scholar Tom Metcalfe’s quest for a mysterious poem by celebrated poet Francis Blundy, which was read aloud as a birthday gift

to his wife Vivien at a fabled dinner party in 2014, then lost forever. An ornate hymn to the natural world, the poem was of such hallucinatory beauty that idealists claim it could have, should have, awoken humankind to looming environmental disaster. Sanctified by time and mystery, the poem has become a “repository of dreams”. Later, the novel transports us back to our era, to the real lives of Francis and Vivien Blundy, and a story of love, loss, illness, crime, betrayal, secrets and revenge emerges that changes everything.

The novel is a riff on unchanging human nature, the power and illusions of literature and our narrow temporal perspectives. And it throbs with a profound sense of environmental loss.

“I’ve always felt that [loss], because a lot of literature is set in spaces that are no longer available to you,” says McEwan. “Any reader of Thomas Hardy feels this ache for what southern England used to be. Anyone who reads Wordsworth could envy the spaces,

WHAT WE CAN KNOW

Haunted by a chilling sense of environmental loss, McEwan’s new book, *What We Can Know*, is partly set in 2119, when environmental catastrophe has left the UK’s lowlands underwater. A quest, thriller and love story, the multi-layered novel traces scholar Tom Metcalfe’s search for a lost poem of sublime beauty, mystery and power.

What We Can Know is out now (penguin.co.uk).





"There is still much to celebrate. But... we have got to look after it"

"We are wedged between the dead and the unborn," says McEwan. "Part of the ambition of this novel was to bring all three together, because people of the past were as alive and as self-evident to themselves as we are... and it has to be true of (people in) the future. They seem like ghosts, the past and the future... But we have to get in our minds that people in the future will be as real to themselves as we are."

WRITING THE FUTURE

Today, bookshops are full of intelligent climate novels, such as Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012) and Kim Stanley-Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020). But what role can novels play in the climate debate? Scientific papers can be dulled by repetition. Might we jolt ourselves awake with our imaginations? When former US President Barack Obama read Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), about the destruction of trees, he said: "It changed how I thought about the Earth."

McEwan fears that apocalyptic dystopias simply "paralyse everyone with pessimism". And novels in which humanity survives through "over-optimistic human ingenuity" feel too idealistic. But he often reflects on a line by Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, above all, to make you see."

Any writing which inspires us to see the beauty of nature, or envision its loss, wields real power. In his new novel, McEwan describes how the world's writers responded to the unfurling climate disaster with laments of crystalline beauty and eloquent fury. Perhaps, ominously, today's boom in climate fiction, and the parallel wave of gorgeous Macfarlane-esque nature writing, marks the start of this process for real.

"You could take the view that rather than warn people we need to celebrate what we have," says McEwan. "I think

the lifeline will have snapped, somehow, if you stop celebrating. And there is still much to celebrate. But also point out that we could lose it, so we have got to look after it."

Buoyed by his grandchildren's tree-climbing energy and their delight in outdoor life, McEwan retains a "muted optimism" for the future. He sees hope in the community of scientists, farmers, writers, environmentalists and citizens striving for change.

"All across the Earth, there are people doing interesting things, high-tech things, low-tech things," he says. "But I think we are going to have to endure some catastrophes first. And with each disaster, we will tell ourselves: this has woken us up..." 



Mark Bailey is a freelance writer who has written for *The Observer*, *The Times* and *National Geographic*. marksbailey.com

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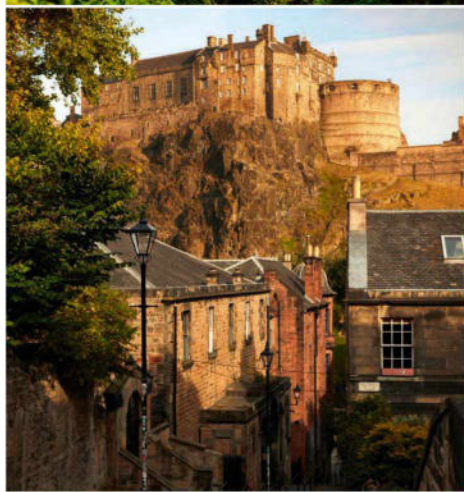
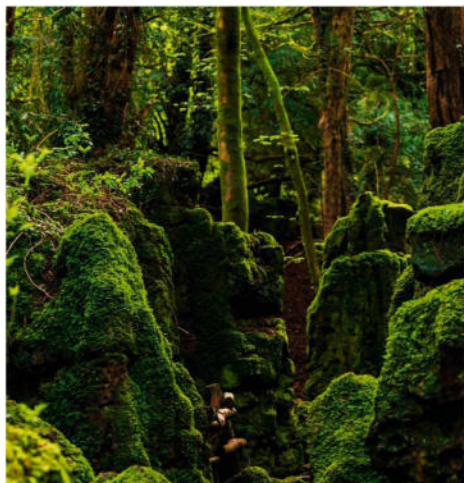
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TOP 10

SUPERB LITERARY SETTINGS

Ellie Tennant explores
the stunning landscapes
that have inspired
best-selling novels



The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings

JRR Tolkien

Fantasy author JRR Tolkien's mythological Middle Earth takes inspiration from a number of places in Gloucestershire and the West Midlands. Tolkien frequently visited the Forest of Dean and its temperate rainforest Puzzlewood, which is said to have influenced his creation of tangled, mossy forests such as Mirkwood. Tolkien's fictional ents – strange, gnarled, tree-like creatures who protect the ancient woodlands – might also have their roots here (puzzlewood.net).

The idyllic Shire, home of hobbit Bilbo Baggins, is reminiscent of the sleepy villages and gentle undulating hills around the verdant Vale of Evesham, where Tolkien visited his brother, Hilary, who had a pretty orchard of plum and pear trees. Today, an annual 55-mile, AA-signposted Blossom Trail blooms with colour in spring (valeandspa.co.uk/blossom).

Other nearby beauty spots appear in Tolkien's work. His illustration of the Doors of Durin – a hidden entrance to the mountain that harbours the dwarf city of Khazad-dûm – is almost identical to the north door of St Edward's Church in the Cotswold town of Stow-on-the-Wold, which has vast trees each side of it that have merged with the stone over centuries.

Don't miss: The Malvern Hills (pictured), which Tolkien often visited in the 1930s, are said to have inspired Gondor. Here you can walk along the 14km ridge and enjoy stunning views from Worcestershire Beacon. Just keep your eyes peeled for sneaky hobbitses...

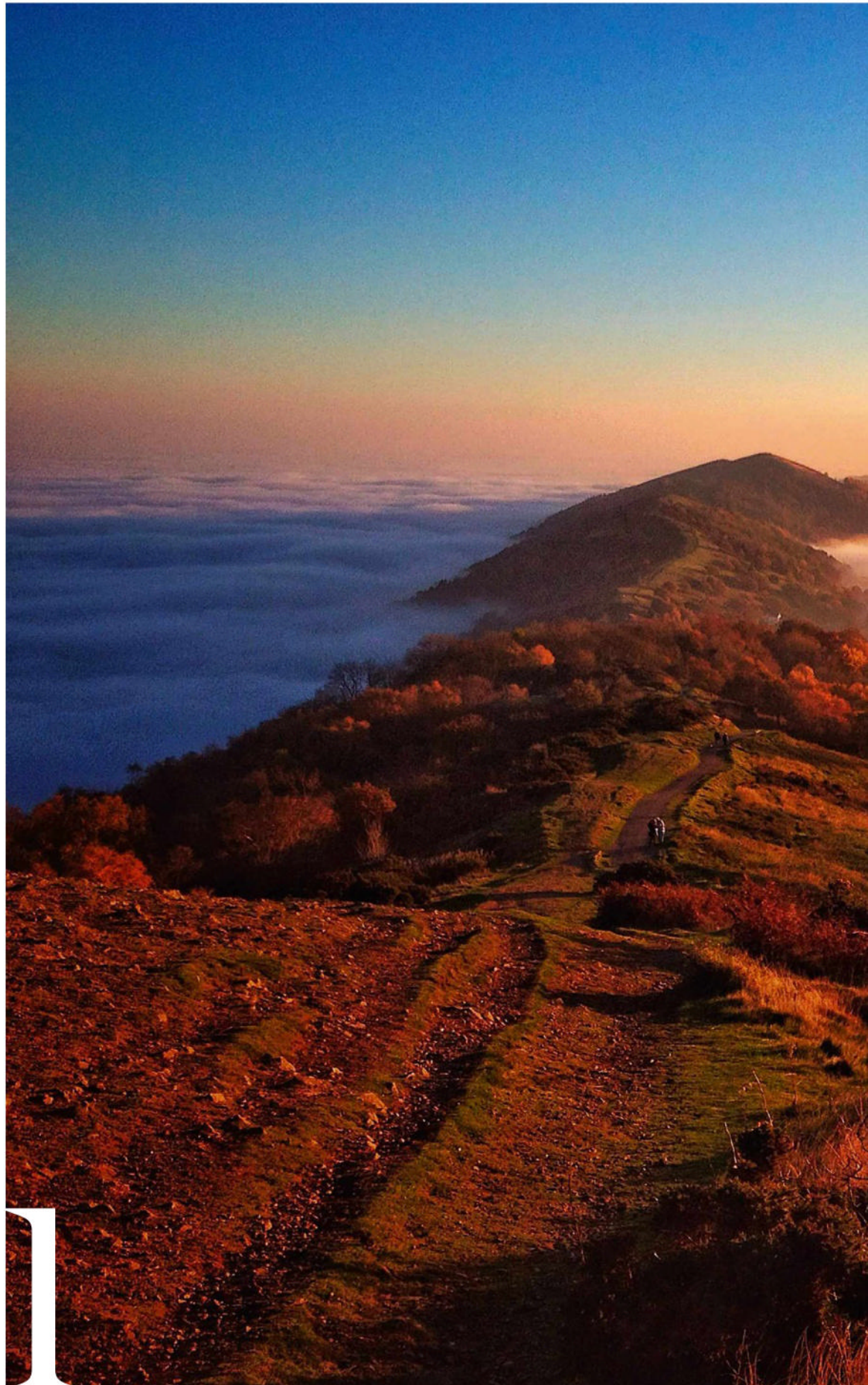




Photo: Alamy



A Game of Thrones

George RR Martin

"The Wall sprang from my visit to Hadrian's Wall in 1981," wrote George RR Martin, American author of *A Game of Thrones* (1996). This first novel in the fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* became the basis for the hit HBO TV drama in 2011.

Martin's fictional wall is an ancient barrier of ice, stone and magic, hundreds of miles long, defended by the Night's Watch. It protects the Seven Kingdoms from the dangerous northern wilderness, and the undead Others and human Wildlings who live north of the wall.

In reality, Hadrian's Wall is a magnificent 73-mile, coast-to-coast structure built by Emperor Hadrian in the 2nd century CE to defend the north-west frontier of the Roman Empire. It's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and you can walk the length of it along the Hadrian's Wall Path National Trail, which runs from Bowness-on-Solway in Cumbria to Wallsend, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. english-heritage.org.uk

Don't miss: The Solway salt marshes in Cumbria, near the trail's start, have amazing wildlife and coastal scenery.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe CS Lewis

Born in East Belfast, CS Lewis holidayed on the north coast of County Antrim as a child. The beauty of the landscape moved him and influenced the setting of Narnia in his 1950 children's fantasy novel *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. It is thought that Narnia's capital, Cair Paravel, is based on the derelict cliff-top Dunluce Castle near Castlerock.

"The castle of Cair Paravel on its little hill towered up above them; before them were the sands, with rocks and little pools of salt water, and seaweed, and the smell of the sea and long miles of

bluish-green waves breaking for ever and ever on the beach. And oh, the cry of the seagulls! Have you heard it? Can you remember?" he wrote in his classic story.

The romantic ruins of the present castle date from the 16th century and loom over the Atlantic Ocean, not far from the Giant's Causeway. Visit the site and explore the Causeway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, too – a stunning landscape of red sandstone, black basalt, grey clay and white limestone.

Irish legend, the Children of Lir, has roots in Antrim. In the tale, four children are turned

into swans by their evil sorceress stepmother and spend 300 years on the Sea of Moyle, which stretches from the Antrim Coast to Scotland. This Celtic story shows how resilience and love can overcome the darkest of curses – and could well have influenced a young CS Lewis.

Don't miss: Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge (below) allows visitors to cross the sea to Carrick-a-Rede Island, where there is a charming 250-year-old fisherman's cottage, now owned by the National Trust.



Pride and Prejudice Jane Austen

"There is not a finer county in England than Derbyshire," wrote Jane Austen in her 1813 classic *Pride and Prejudice*, which is heavily influenced by the pretty villages, grand estates and vast landscapes Austen admired in this region.

Austen is rumoured to have written her novel while staying in Bakewell, which is thought to have inspired the fictional town of Lambton. Mr Darcy's imposing residence Pemberley was based on the stately

home Chatsworth House (pictured); scenes for the 2005 film were shot there.

To see the lake where Colin Firth's Mr Darcy emerged, famously, in a wet white shirt in the 1995 BBC adaptation, head to the National Trust's Lyme Park Estate. Incidentally, that shirt auctioned for £25,000 last year. Presumably it has now dried out.

Pride and Prejudice has been adapted for the screen at least 17 times. It is currently

being filmed for Netflix with Olivia Colman as Mrs Bennet, Emma Corrin as Elizabeth Bennet and Jack Lowden as Mr Darcy.

The Peak District's untamed landscape reflects Elizabeth's daring character and wild nature. On screen, rocky Peak District locations create dramatic scenes. In the 1995 BBC series, Elizabeth (Jennifer Ehle) climbs the outcrop Ramshaw Rocks, while in the 2005 film, Keira

Knightley's Elizabeth stands – windswept and moody – atop the four-mile-long gritstone ridge of Stanage Edge, looking to the vast Hope Valley beneath, her cape billowing.

Don't miss: 2025 marks the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth. Special events include guided walks and a Regency ball in Buxton. [visitpeakdistrict.com/events/category/jane-austen-250](https://www.visitpeakdistrict.com/events/category/jane-austen-250)



Photos: Alamy



Harry Potter JK Rowling

JK Rowling penned her early manuscripts in The Elephant House – a humble café on George IV Bridge in Edinburgh – and the city's landscape influenced her writing. Rowling took names for some characters from gravestones she spotted in Greyfriars Kirkyard (such as Robert Potter and Thomas Riddle) and the bustling Victoria Street inspired Diagon Alley.

While many scenes at Hogwarts were shot at Oxford's Christchurch College, the likely inspiration for the magical school is Edinburgh's gothic George Heriot's School, with its turrets and austere architecture. To tread in Rowling's footsteps, take a Harry Potter walking tour of the city.

From Edinburgh, head to the Highlands, where many scenes in the films were shot. Loch Sheil, Loch Morag and Loch Eilt appear as Hogwarts Lake, while Dumbledore's grave on the Island of Trees is the small island Eilean na Moine on Loch Eilt. To ride Hogwarts Express, catch the Jacobite steam train over the Glenfinnan Viaduct.

Don't miss: A hike up Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh, an ancient volcano 251m above sea level with excellent views of the surrounding landscape.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit Beatrix Potter

London-based children's author and illustrator Beatrix Potter enjoyed summer holidays in the Lake District and was charmed by the beauty of the landscape there. She stayed at Cumbrian country houses, such as Lingholm, which has a large kitchen garden that was the original inspiration for Mr McGregor's garden in her first book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

The proceeds from this popular story enabled her to buy her own Lakeland retreat – Hill Top (pictured), a pretty

farmhouse near Sawrey in Ambleside – which she owned from 1905 until her death in 1943. This idyllic dwelling with its slate roof, cottage garden and unspoilt interior is now owned by the National Trust. Visitors to Hill Top can spot glimpses of the house and garden in the charming illustrations in many of Potter's little books, such as *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (1907) where it is the home of Tabitha Twitchit and her three mischievous kittens, Moppet, Mittens and Tom. You can even see the

famous rhubarb patch in the garden which features in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*.

Esthwaite Water is nearby, as is Claife Viewing Station on Windermere's west shore, where you can enjoy lake vistas and a four-mile ambling trail. nationaltrust.co.uk

Don't miss: "The loveliest spot that man hath ever found."

Allan Bank is the former home of William Wordsworth, another Lake District literary hero. nationaltrust.co.uk





Wuthering Heights Emily Brontë

When Emily Brontë wrote her bleak gothic novel *Wuthering Heights* in 1847, she drew inspiration from long walks on the lonely moors above the village of Haworth in West Yorkshire, where she lived with her sisters Anne and Charlotte from 1820 to 1861.

Even the name of her tale references weather and landscape, and Brontë often conveys Heathcliff's brooding mood via the cold, foggy moorland that surrounds him.

"My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath," his soulmate Cathy declares, likening her love for him to the gritstone outcrops in areas such as Ponden Kirk (renamed Penistone Crag in the novel) where the fated lovers meet. Today, you can hike to Ponden Kirk from Haworth and visit the ruins of Top Withens, said to be the inspiration for the *Wuthering Heights* farmhouse.

Margot Robbie plays Cathy to Jacob Elordi's Heathcliff in a film adaptation of the novel, due for release in February 2026.

Don't miss: The Brontë Parsonage Museum is located at the former Brontë family home in Haworth, West Yorkshire. bronte.org.uk

His Dark Materials Philip Pullman

Fantasy author Philip Pullman studied English at the University of Oxford's Exeter College and was inspired by both the layout and location of his alma mater when he created the fictional Jordan College in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

Pullman's imaginary Oxford in the parallel universe inhabited by young heroine Lyra Belacqua has many similarities to the real city – for example, the Bodleian Library (pictured) is renamed Bodley's Library and houses the alethiometer

– a magical truth-telling instrument that allows Lyra to find answers to questions. Oxford's covered market is mentioned, too, and it is on unremarkable Sunderland Avenue, adjacent to the ring-road, that hero Will Parry finds his first window into another world. Proof, perhaps, that the magical may exist in the most mundane of places.

Other city attractions include Pitt Rivers Museum, where Lyra investigates the Tartar phenomenon of trepanned skulls in *The*

Subtle Knife, and the lovely Oxford Botanic Garden, where Lyra and Will pledge to meet on a bench at noon every Midsummer's Day. Beyond the city, enjoy beautiful walks such as the Ridgeway, the Chilterns Way and the Thames Path.

Don't miss: Port Meadow – a large area of open common land rich in wildlife just north of the city centre. It's a Site of Special Scientific Interest with great views of the city and a lovely place for a stroll.





Winnie-the-Pooh AA Milne

AA Milne lived at Cotchford Farm on the edge of Ashdown Forest in East Sussex and was inspired by adventures with his young son Christopher Robin – and his favourite teddy bear, Pooh – to write his much-loved *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories, which were illustrated beautifully by *EH Shepard*.

Milne's "100 Aker Wood" is as unspoilt today as it was when he wrote his novel in 1926. Many of the story's locations can be visited on foot: a cluster of Scots pines inspired *The Enchanted Place*; a large conifer on a heath became the Heffalump Trap, where Pooh and Piglet tried to capture a terrifying creature; and a small sandstone quarry appears as Roo's Sandy Pit. The famous Poohsticks Bridge from Milne's final book *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928) is real, too, although it has been restored over the years. Built in 1907, Posingford Bridge is half a mile from a handy car park on Chuck Hatch Lane.

ashdownforest.org

Don't miss: The AA Milne and EH Shepard memorial at the lovely Gills Lap (called Galleons Lap in the stories) offers fabulous views from this beauty spot.

Dracula Bram Stoker

A visit to the Yorkshire harbour town of Whitby in 1890 gave Irish author Bram Stoker atmospheric settings for his gothic horror novel, as well as the perfect name for his infamous vampire.

The ruin of Whitby Abbey (pictured) towers over the town and is reached by 199 steps from the church of St Mary, where Stoker noted names from gravestones such as 'Swales' – which he later used for Dracula's first victim. Stoker went to Whitby public library and borrowed a book that referred to Vlad

the Impaler, a 15th-century prince who was said to impale enemies on wooden stakes. He was known as Dracula, meaning 'devil' in Wallachian. Stoker took note.

Tales of Whitby shipwrecks (the Russian ship *Dmitry* ran aground below East Cliff five years before Stoker's visit) inspired the start of the novel, in which a ship is wrecked at East Cliff and a large dog (Dracula!) leaps from the vessel before running up 199 steps to a church.

Whitby Abbey is open to visitors and hosts regular

events (english-heritage.org.uk). Whitby itself has much to offer, including whale watching trips, a Captain Cook memorial museum and beautiful sandy beaches. The North York Moors National Park is nearby, as is the picturesque fishing village of Robin Hood's Bay. 

Don't miss: Fossil hunting at Whitby, which is on the Dinosaur Coast. Try Saltwick Bay or Boggle Hole for breathtaking scenery and to search for ammonites.



10



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Photos: Getty

An elusive, snake-like fish,
the European eel can live
for more than 60 years

The *final* *journey*

The life cycle of the European eel involves one of nature's most remarkable migration stories. Yet they are now critically endangered – and no one knows why. **Kevin Parr** delves deeper

PEEK over the parapet of a bridge just as daylight bleeds into dusk, gazing down through the clear layers of a shallow river or chalk stream, and you may glimpse the shadowy, serpentine form of an eel as it stirs for the night.

Darkness is when eels search for food, scavenging or hunting by way of an acute sense of smell. They nudge stones and nose into crevices, seeking invertebrates or small fish. Theirs is an unfussy, carnivorous diet, with individual preference sometimes dictating the shape of their mouth and head. Each year, however, fewer and fewer eels worm between the watery weed-beds.

Once common, the European eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) is in huge decline. Rated as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), their estimated population has dropped by as much as 95%, and no one can be sure why.

Despite its appearance, the European eel is a fish, one of around 1,000 eel species worldwide. The dorsal, anal and caudal fins combine to form a singular, ribbon-like fin along much of its back and belly. This can be inconspicuous as the eel slithers through stone and weed, which,

“Darkness is when eels search for food, scavenging and hunting”

alongside a fixed stare and slippery form, adds to the impression of an aquatic snake. Their mysterious existence has long caused confusion, although their edibility has never been in dispute.

EAST END DELICACY

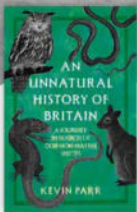
In his 1653 book *The Compleat Angler*, Izaak Walton recommended the eel be stuffed with herbs, anchovy and nutmeg before roasting on a spit. He also wrote of the Romans' fondness for

the eel, noting that they “esteemed her the Helena of their feasts”, although he gives heed that physicians deem eel to be “dangerous meat” – reference, no doubt, to the toxicity of their blood.

Such was the eel's former abundance that numbers could be caught with relatively crude methods, and they

became a staple in the diet of Londoners, particularly in the East End where they were jellied or baked in pies.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, eels would be caught from the Thames by eel-bobbers, who would tie worms onto a length of wool which was then ‘bobbed’ from a moored boat. The lack of a hook was not a problem because the wool would tangle in the eels' small teeth, enabling the bobber to lift them out and deposit them into a tub. Elsewhere, wicker traps would be weighted, baited with worms or offal and lowered into a watercourse on a stout cord. The design allowed eels to enter via a small orifice in an inverted tunnel which they would struggle to locate in order to escape.



An Unnatural History of Britain
by Kevin Parr is out now.
thehistorypress.co.uk

A fisher uses a large net
to catch eels on the
Norfolk Broads in 1887

Other fishing methods included the use of an eel-fork, which had narrow gaps between barbed tines and, most commonly, with nets. These could be set at the lowest ebb on tidal water or positioned behind eel-weirs, which were constructed with interwoven willow branches that would channel the eels through specific gaps.

ENTRAILS OF THE EARTH

Eels are catadromous, meaning that they live in freshwater but migrate to the sea to breed. Although many spend their entire adult lives in freshwater – some remain in estuaries or move in and out of tidal reaches. While living in freshwater, they have dark, olive-brown backs that fade to a pale yellow-brown on the belly.

The male eels lack reproductive organs, something that has long perplexed science as to their manner of reproduction. In the 4th century

***“It was believed
that eels would
grow from the
hairs of horses”***

BCE, the Greek polymath Aristotle believed eels to be born from the “entrails of the earth”, suggestive of spontaneous generation. In British folklore, it was believed that eels would grow from the hairs of horses, dropped into the water while the animal was taking a drink. In 1876, as part of his medical studies at the University of Vienna, Sigmund Freud dissected around 400 eels in a futile search for male testes, subsequently turning his attention to the human mind. Perhaps aquatic biology’s loss was neurology’s gain.

Unknown to Freud, and to all of those who had previously puzzled, was that he was searching for something that wasn’t there. An eel does not evolve into sexual maturity until it has left freshwater and begun a one-way migration across the Atlantic to breed and then die.

The drivers behind this change are uncertain, with age not seemingly a factor, but eels change in appearance, with their butter-brown bellies becoming silver as they move back towards salt water. The change is prompted by a shift in biological make-up as the eel builds levels of cortisol, the hormone required to survive salinity. These ‘silver eels’ had long been recognised as fish heading to the sea to breed, while ‘elvers’, the small 7–10cm-long juveniles that would mass into rivermouths on spring nights beneath a new moon, were known to be returning young.

The process between remained a saltwater puzzle until the species *Leptocephalus brevirostris*, a small semi-transparent oceanic fish, was observed into maturity.

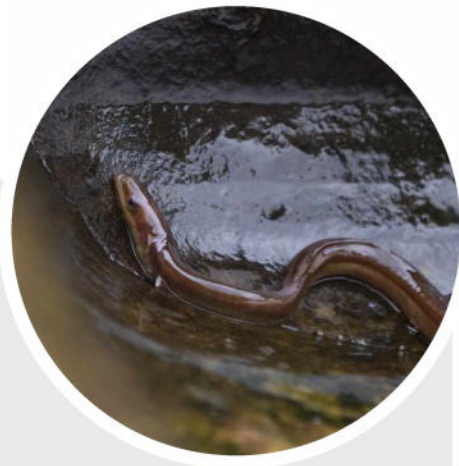
In the late 19th century, studies of specimens taken from the Straits of Messina, by Yves Delage in France, and Giovan Grassi and Salvatore Calandruccio in Italy, revealed that the leaf-shaped *leptocephali* would metamorphosise into smaller, slimmer, 'glass' eels. Grassi concluded that the breeding place of the European eel was within the 'abyssal region' of the sea, with the vicious currents of Messina forcing the larvae to the surface where they might be observed.

Other scientists, however, believed the solution lay further afield. In 1904, a Danish vessel netted a specimen of *Leptocephalus brevirostris* to the west of the Faroe Isles. Aboard the research boat was Ernst Johannes Schmidt, who subsequently led a series of expeditions as part of the Dana Investigation. Schmidt found that the further west they were caught, the smaller the *leptocephali* were, and he suspected that the larvae originated in the Sargasso Sea, a gyre bounded by four currents in the western Atlantic.

In April 1922, Schmidt travelled from Madeira, via the Canary Islands, to the Sargasso. There he caught thousands of tiny eel larvae, both of the European eel and its close cousin the American eel (*Anguilla rostrata*). The following year he published his findings, and though he had been unable to record or witness fertilisation, he concluded that the silver eels, having left European waters in the autumn, would travel across the Atlantic to arrive in the Sargasso Sea the following spring. Almost a century passed before Schmidt's theory was confirmed, when migrating eels were tagged and satellite tracked. Their journey time varied, but once there the eels would mate and perish, with the fertilised eggs left to the apparent whim of the ocean.

GULF STREAM CHANGES

The sea plays an integral role in the eel's life cycle, offering the eggs warmth and the developing larvae food in the form of marine snow, a blanket of



10 QUICKFIRE ANSWERS

Your questions about European eels answered by our expert, Kevin Parr.

HOW BIG ARE EUROPEAN EELS?
Typically around 40cm long but can grow to 120cm and weigh 5kg. The largest European eel caught in the UK was 119cm long and weighed 5kg. It was hooked in Kent in 2024 by angler Steve Ricketts.

HOW LONG DO THEY LIVE?
It varies, but they mature at around eight-years-old and might live for 60 years or more.

WHERE ARE EELS SEEN IN THE UK?
All around the coastline and inland in rivers, streams, ponds and lochs.

ARE EUROPEAN EELS SLIMY?
Yes, they are covered in a mucus that protects them from disease and helps them evade predators.

CAN EELS SURVIVE OUT OF WATER?
For short periods, yes. There are anecdotal records of them moving across land to reach other water courses.

organic matter that drifts through the water columns. Meanwhile, the Gulf Stream, the warm current of water that nudges from the Gulf of Mexico to north-west Europe, gently carries the larvae back to the waters where their parents previously swam. After a drift across several thousand miles that may last two years, the larvae develop into glass eels, adept at propelling their own course into estuaries where they then darken into elvers.

Some scientists believe that this extraordinary cycle may have begun shortly after the breakup of the singular supercontinent of Pangaea. With the land masses closer together, the migration would have been shorter and less treacherous.

More recently, as the climate changes, the reliance upon the Gulf Stream will likely impact the number of juvenile eels reaching Europe. Studies suggest the current has weakened, shifting north

DO THEY BITE PEOPLE?

They do have small teeth but would only bite humans in self defence.

DO EELS HAVE BONES?

Yes, they have a skeleton with bones that they can partially digest as they migrate to breed.

ARE EUROPEAN EELS ELECTRIC?

No, only three species of eel can discharge electric shocks; they occur in South America.

CAN I FISH FOR EELS?

Yes, but they are prone to deep-hooking. Advice on safe rigs can be found at nationalanguillaclub.co.uk

DO ALL EUROPEAN EELS MIGRATE TO THE SARGASSO SEA?

Some don't and continue to grow and age. Very large eels have been observed in places such as Loch Ness.

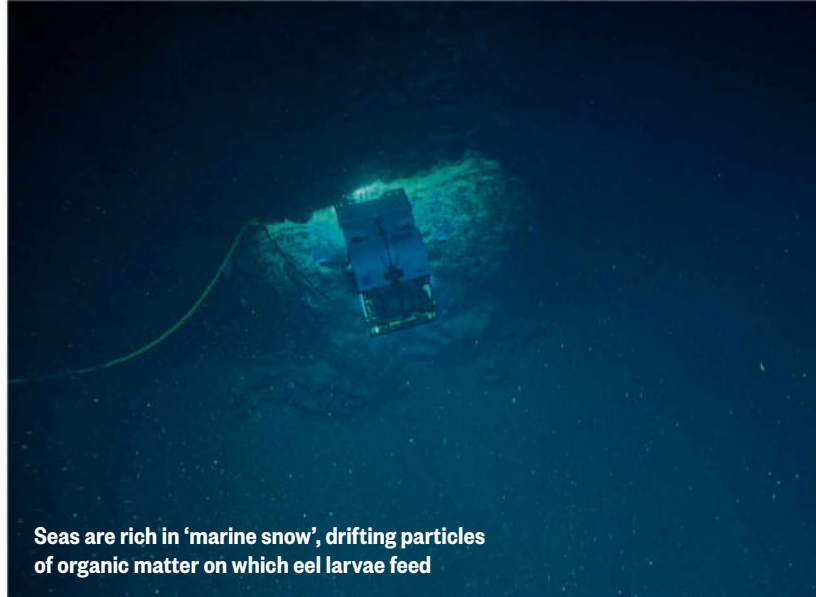
by approximately five kilometres per decade. This will hinder dispersal of eel larvae and impact the adult eels trying to return to the Sargasso Sea.

Eels have magnetoreception, enabling them to navigate by using the Earth's magnetic field, in a similar manner to homing pigeons. The forces within this field are not constant, and the flux may alter the eel's sense of direction, particularly if a long period has passed since the internal maps were formed. And eels have extraordinary longevity.

A Norwegian study found the age of silver eels migrating back to sea can vary between eight and 35 years, while a female eel in a Dutch aquarium was observed to spontaneously mature at the age of 43 years. So much will change over such a period, including the details held in a magnetic map. Impacts that are decades old may only now be being felt.



Jellied eel was once a diet staple for Londoners



Seas are rich in 'marine snow', drifting particles of organic matter on which eel larvae feed



Eel larvae – tiny translucent fish known as *leptocephali* – later develop into glass eels



On entering freshwater, European glass eels darken into elvers

“A journey through half a dozen life stages and across thousands of miles of water”

We know overfishing and bycatch discard are problematic. The formation of bodies such as the Sustainable Eel Group and DUPAN Foundation – collaborations of conservationists, scientists and fish farmers – are hopeful steps. Many eel netters are turning their skills to conservation, capturing elvers to redistribute above weirs or other barriers. Farming might offer a sustainable source for food production, rearing larvae to maturity or using biotechnology to stimulate sexual maturity in adults. And perhaps we should all consider the ethics of eating eels; although, as they become rarer, so their value grows.

Eels are predated at all stages of their life, by larger fish, aquatic mammals and birds. This is a natural process, and though predation can impact a species in decline, the factors causing that slump must be addressed for recovery in the long term.

More significant was the arrival in the 1980s of *Anguillicoloides crassus*, a nematode worm native to Asia that parasites the swim bladder of the eel. Its presence may stifle the ability of mature eels to migrate, yet the decline of the American eel, which shares the spawning grounds in the Sargasso, suggests the drop in recruitment is more complex. Similarly, obstacles to

movement, particularly hydroelectric dams, will play a part, but issues in the open ocean are difficult to identify and we have little idea as to the mortality rate of silver eels or larval eels at sea.

The life cycle of the eel is one of nature's most extraordinary stories. A journey through half a dozen life stages and across thousands of miles of water. Their plight might be easily overlooked amid so much ecological uncertainty, but it would be a tragedy to lose eels from our seas and rivers. Should you peek over the parapet of a bridge and spot an eel snaking through the water below, wish it well on its odyssey. ^{CF}



Kevin Parr is an angler, nature writer and naturalist. His new book *Unnatural History of Britain* (Flint/History Press) is out now.

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Communities around the world crafted harvest tokens in a wide range of styles; many UK regions have their own distinct designs, such as the flat, splayed shape of this Welsh Border fan

Plaiting gold

For thousands of years, corn dollies, or harvest tokens, were crafted by our ancestors to house the spirit of the crop, but this intricate art is now at risk of extinction. **Julie Brominicks** finds out why

Photos: Phil Sproson



These regional designs include the Welsh Border fan (left), Essex terret (centre) and Norfolk lantern (right)

Corn-dolly crafter Colette Hughes describes the bleak situations our ancestors faced. “Imagine,” she says. “It’s winter and your family is hungry and cold. It gets dark early, fresh food is in short supply. You could eat that grain that you’ve kept to plant. Do you?” It’s a sunny day in North Wales, but she paints a vivid scene.

The corn dollies that Colette has created – by folding, knotting or plaiting hollow straw stems into various shapes, such as twists, figures or fans – are displayed on the table. Intriguing, golden and intricate, they inspire curiosity.

Cultivation of corn (a generic term for all cereals such as wheat, barley and oats) began about 10,000 years ago in West Asia, from where the practice spread. Before soil fertility and germination was understood, communities worldwide put their hopes for a good harvest in a deity. The success, or otherwise, of a crop could be a life or death situation.

Many legends claim that the spirit of the corn lived in the fields. Perhaps it was seen moving through the corn as the wind scythed the crop into waves. Our pre-Christian ancestors believed the spirit retreated further as the corn was harvested and would die if the corn was all thrashed, so the last of the crop was used to fashion a receptacle in which the spirit could

“Legend claims the spirit of corn lived in the field”

dwell during winter until spring, when it was returned to the field.

In British folklore, evidence is scant. References to ‘dressing’ the sheaf date from the 16th century, while a record of fashioning a shape from the last of the corn came two centuries later. But pagan and Christian traditions frequently co-mingled, and corn dollies, as they became known, were

often made to celebrate both Lammas (the first day of the harvest season) and Christian harvest festivals.

Unlike contemporary artisan creations, the original forms were simply fashioned in the field, usually by men, and the skills passed from father to son. The term ‘dolly’ wasn’t used until the 20th century, by which time the craft had almost died out. Agriculture was changing and mechanisation was replacing the manual reaping undertaken by bands of labourers. However, enthusiasm for the craft was rekindled at the Festival of Britain in 1951, for which two giant corn figures of a lion and a unicorn were made by Fred Mizen. The revival was further advanced by individuals who elaborated on the original straw forms, and Women’s Institute members who scrambled to publish and teach designs and techniques.

THE NECK, MAIDEN AND MARE

Corn-dolly making has since declined sufficiently for the national charity Heritage Crafts to place it on the Red

John Lewis makes lantern-style corn dollies at his father's farm in Hardwick, Gloucestershire, 1953



Writer Julie tries her hand at making a compass plait design

List of Endangered Crafts. Bred to better withstand storms, modern cereals have stems that are too short for plaiting, we have less appreciation of how our food is produced, and harvesting is often done by one person on a tractor.

Along with the more complex recent dolly designs, we risk losing a varied and rich rural heritage of earlier, simpler harvest forms and customs. The last shock of corn, plaited and tied with ribbons, was called the 'neck' (with various spellings) and is particularly associated with Devon and Cornwall where the tradition of 'crying the neck' has been revived. "*I have 'un*" "*What have 'ee?*" "*A neck*" is chanted three times in celebration.

Likewise, in southern Scotland, northern England and Ireland, 'crying the kirk' was a shout to let neighbouring farms know that the last sheaf – known as 'kirk-baby' or simply 'kirk' (various spellings) – had been cut. The kirk was dressed in clothes, paper or ribbons. Meanwhile, in Kent, the best of the corn was made into an

'Ivy Girl'. Elsewhere in Scotland, the last sheaf was dressed either as a 'cailleach' (an old woman) or a 'maighdean bhuana' (a maiden), depending on whether the harvest was good or bad.

The last standing corn was divided into four 'legs' and fashioned into a 'mare' in Herefordshire, Shropshire and possibly Wales, where some harvest forms were called 'caseg fedi'. ('Fedi' means harvest in Welsh, but 'caseg' means both mare and wave, and might refer to waves made by wind in the crop.) The reapers then threw sickles at the legs to detach the mare from the field. Some accounts describe it being borne triumphantly to the farmhouse.

Yet in other areas, where it was considered bad luck to be the last to finish harvesting, the mare was hastily dispatched to neighbouring farmers who were still reaping. Similarly, the 'gaobbir bhacagh' (cripple goat) on the Isle of Skye was a bundle of corn passed by the first finished farmer to the next, and so on.

AROUND THE WORLD

Throughout Asia, customs have evolved around the spirit that dwells in the rice. In Japan, 'shimekazari,' straw garlands, are hung over lintels at New Year.

At harvest time in Bali, two sheaves are fashioned into a 'husband' and 'wife' and stored in the barn with an inducement to 'increase and multiply'.

In North Africa, Central Asia and Greece, a design called the 'Arabic Cage' is one of the oldest known. Woven from straw, it uses a simple lattice technique.

Meanwhile, in Turkey, the 'kusa dazi' is an intricate pear-shaped receptacle from which smaller pendulums dangle. These are not dissimilar to lantern designs thought to have roots in Guatemala, Romania and Greece.

Simple fringes made in English counties such as Lancashire and Shropshire have counterparts in Cyprus, Montenegro, Morocco and Libya.

Closer to home, fusing pagan and Christian beliefs, St Brigid's crosses are made across Ireland at the start of the planting season (or Imbolc) in February, rather than at harvest.

And across the North Sea in Scandinavia, 'julebocks' or Yule Goats are fashioned.



FIND OUT MORE

Straw Craftsmen is a membership group for anyone with an interest in corn craft. Their website is a good resource for information and suppliers, and courses for learning the craft, many of which run in summer. strawcraftsmen.co.uk

Heritage Crafts has compiled an overview of straw-working information. heritagecrafts.org.uk/craft/corn-dolly-making

Occasional corn-dolly workshops are held at the Woodland Skills Centre in Bodfari, Denbighshire. woodlandskillscentre.uk

Try your hand at a Christmas straw-work workshop by **Something Corny** in Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, 25 and 26 October. somethingcorny.co.uk/workshops

The Museum of British Folklore in Launceston, Cornwall, held an exhibition on harvest craft and traditions in 2020, called 'The Maiden, the Neck and the Mare'. This straw-craft collection is now in storage; contact them to see images. museumofbritishfolklore.com

Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (prm.ox.ac.uk) and the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading (merl.reading.ac.uk) have straw-craft collections. Contact them in advance to make the most of your visit.

The author is grateful for information from Veronica Main of Hat Plait (hatplait.co.uk), and Ollie Douglas from the Museum of English Rural Life.

Craft straw-grower Rosemary Sault drives a 1958 tractor, using a 1930s binder to slice and bundle her heritage wheat crop



Whether feared or celebrated, what came to be known as 'dollies' were made across Britain. Only in the 20th century did they become more elaborate. The neck (spiral around a core) and drop dolly (spiral without a core) were widespread. New designs evolved, including the Essex terret, Suffolk horseshoe and Welsh Border fan; lanterns from Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Norfolk; and chandeliers from Yorkshire, County Durham and Pembrokeshire.

A GROWING CRAFT

Colette makes her dollies from straw grown in Yoxall, Staffordshire, by Rosemary Sault, the only person in Britain to grow straw especially for the craft market. Alongside some rye and oats, Rosemary mainly grows Maris Widgeon heritage wheat, which is tall enough to be plaited. She

harvests it when the stems are slightly green and pliable. After hanging it to dry in an airy barn, she sells it in bundles or sheaves.

On a hot July day, I visit Rosemary on the mixed farm where she and her husband James also raise sheep and cattle. The wheat is golden and ruffled by a warm breeze, the bearded ears abrasive to touch.

Rosemary drives a 1958 tractor, pulling a 1930s binder which slices the wheat before popping it out in neat bundles. This is the farming end of what has now become an artisan craft done mostly indoors. Rosemary's work requires agility, tenacity, muscle, agricultural knowledge and some very early mornings. She is, frankly, awesome. Nevertheless, single-handedly supplying Britain's corn-crafters is unsustainable, and Rosemary bears the responsibility



A Norfolk Lantern design; the word 'dolly' may be derived from 'idol' or the Greek word 'eidolon' (apparition)

“It is satisfying to see the plait growing”

anxiously. There have been wet summers when she couldn't harvest, and had to rely on stored straw. And that's before tossing climate change and pigeons into the equation.

Rosemary teaches me how to make a 'compass plait', which involves folding four stems of straw one over the other. It's pleasant to feel the smooth malleable straw, the task is relaxing and it is satisfying to see the plait growing into something both decorative and potentially useful. The bending, plaiting and knotting techniques are all transferable skills derived from industries such as hat

and rope making. Whether for modern or traditional designs, corn-dolly making skills need to be learned. Both Rosemary and Colette try to secure the craft's future by teaching children. "If everyone doing it passes the skills on..." says Rosemary.

A quiet resurgence that began during lockdown will hopefully help crafters towards economic sustainability. Straw-work business Something Corny runs online courses (see box). Young crafters, such as May Queen Crafts in Bristol and Corn Dolly Folklore in Essex and Suffolk, have a great social media presence.

I paid a poignant visit to Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, where the corn dollies, trapped behind glass, are now so far removed from the field they seemed not splendid but sad. If we want to save the craft, perhaps we also need to remember its *raison d'être*.

Gone are the days when, aware that their lives depended on it, the entire community helped with the harvest. Yet with climate change threatening food security, we are also vulnerable now. Perhaps corn-dolly crafters and planters of heritage cereal food crops need to join forces.

"Making corn dollies reminds me of our food source," says Colette. She is in the process of acquiring a sheaf of Hen Gymro wheat from Anne Parry of the Welsh Grain Forum, who has grown it to grind into flour in Ceredigion. Corn-dolly making might be endangered, but all is not lost. **CF**



Julie Brominicks is a landscape and travel writer who lives off-grid in West Wales. Her book *The Edge of Cymru* is published by Seren Books.



Beneath the waves

Discontent, trade disputes, red tape and warming seas; the UK fishing industry has weathered 50 years of upheaval. Does a new deal with the EU now signal hope? **Kevin Parr** dives in to assess the industry's current – and future – health



As an island nation, the UK has a long and proud fishing history, a cultural identity that caused waves in the 2016 campaign to leave the EU. For a few days in May 2025 that passion resurfaced, when the Labour Government announced a new deal with the European Union (EU) that aimed to reduce red tape for trade, bring closer collaboration on security and defence, increase energy links and allow young people greater opportunity for travel, study and work.

Much of the media response focused upon fishing, following a 12-year extension of the agreement made in the *European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020*. The new details include a Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement that the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) says “will slash red tape for seafood exporters” and “make it easier to sell British fish to our largest trading partner (the EU)”.

The terms of that original agreement with the EU were due for renegotiation in 2026, so this earlier settlement in May brought a mixed reaction. Some welcomed the SPS agreement, the future stability and the Government promise of £360m investment. Others felt anger and betrayal, suggesting that fishing concessions were used as a late compromise to ensure the whole deal got signed.

After the initial spike of media coverage of the deal dipped, the general interest swiftly ebbed back into the communities, businesses and individuals affected. But amid the trade tangles, warming seas and arguably unadventurous domestic demand, how will the UK fishing industry fare in 2025 and beyond? Let’s go beneath the surface and find out.

MURMURS OF DISCONTENT

Ever since the UK joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, murmurs of discontent have echoed through the fishing industry. The

In 2023, the UK had 3,889 active fishing vessels employing 6,532 people, making an operating profit of £256 million, according to industry body Seafish



A fisher on the boat *Good Intent* flings out a hook to retrieve lobster pots in the North Sea off the coast of Whitby

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, signed in December 1982, brought a sense of order to disputes over maritime activities, including fishing. However, the following year saw the full implementation of the *Common Fishing Policy* across EU member states. This restricted the ability of UK fishers to control fish quotas, while granting access for EU boats to fish in British waters. The issue was further compounded by subsequent accession of new member states.

There were complications – the selling off of quotas, for example – but fishers grew increasingly frustrated with centralised policy that was deemed insufficient to adapt to an ever-changing stock and dynamic.

To some, the 2016 EU Referendum offered the fishing industry a chance to regain a sense of identity and the freedom to set its own quotas and legislation. In June 2016, a survey

“To some, the 2016 EU Referendum offered the fishing industry a chance to regain a sense of identity”

by the University of Aberdeen indicated that more than 92% of people involved in the industry planned to vote to leave the EU.

Brexit offered hope and the result suggested that hope was assured. Boris Johnson, leading figure of the Leave Campaign, and later the Prime Minister who oversaw the withdrawal from the EU, promised: “For the first time since 1973, we will be an independent coastal state with full control of our waters.”

The reality was very different. Though reduced by 25%, EU boats still had access to UK waters and fish, while exports to the EU became subject to third-country checks that

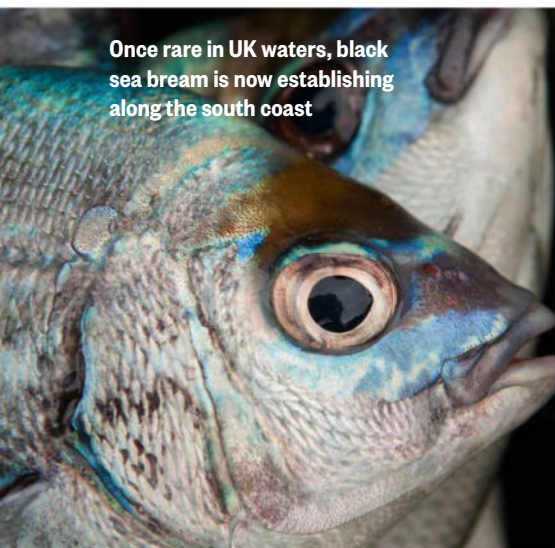
caused immediate logistical difficulties, particularly for fishers and transporters of live produce.

In early 2021, the BBC reported on the West Dorset company, Samways Fish Merchants, which exported around 90% of its goods into the EU and was facing additional paperwork amounting to 71 pages per lorry load, with delays of up to six or seven hours for border checks. Samways ceased trading in 2024.

In response to such difficulties, the Government unveiled a £23m support fund to “navigate the challenges of the next few months”, said the then chief secretary to the Treasury, Steve Barclay. But the anger endured, and



Will British menus soon feature tusk, a whitefish common in UK waters?



Once rare in UK waters, black sea bream is now establishing along the south coast

whispers grew of a 'Brexit betrayal'. "Brexit was an opportunity missed," Elspeth Macdonald, chief executive of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation (SFF), reflects, "but at least we now had a seat at the table. We could make our own rules about our own waters."

BARGAINING CHIP

The SFF represents around 25% of the Scottish fishing fleet, although a far greater proportion of catch and trade, and Macdonald says there are no fishers banging on her door demanding a return to the Common Fisheries Policy. Instead, she sees regulatory autonomy as a positive step forward, as is the ability to negotiate directly with the EU and neighbouring fisheries such as Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland. Yet she felt that fishing was used as a bargaining chip in negotiations and the recent deal has seen sacrifices made for aspects that are mutually beneficial.

"Fairer redistribution of fishing opportunities has not been achieved," says Macdonald, "12 years' access for EU boats with no transfer of fishing opportunities back to the UK is a really bad deal."

Instead, the promises made prior to the referendum – Boris Johnson's suggestion that fishers should get "ready for that El Dorado" – failed to deliver and those voices championing the cause seemed suddenly quiet. Ever since, without the exposure from high-profile figures, interest all but vanished. "Fishing always ends up being the price that is paid," Macdonald reflects.

The fishers represented by the SFF may benefit from having a stronger voice and greater autonomy, but Brexit has left some in the industry in a more difficult position. Based in Brixham, Ian Perkes has worked as a fish merchant for almost 50 years and the last five have been the most difficult.

"It is easier now for us to send fish to Tokyo than send it to France," he says. The champions of Brexit had lauded increased global trade opportunities as a great benefit, but Ian feels he is forced to trade with the US, Japan and the Middle East because trade with neighbours in Europe has become unaffordable and impractical. "We spend 600 euros per day on health certification, customs charges and additional transport costs. In 2024, health certification alone cost us over £40k."

Ian is hopeful that the new SPS terms outlined in May might alleviate some of these issues, but until the detail is ironed out and put into effect, he is unsure as to the extent. At the time of writing, nothing has been rubber-stamped and fishing has again vanished from the front pages.

CULTURAL VALUE

According to The Office of National Statistics (ONS), the fishing sector contributes around 0.03% to the UK economic output (2021). While exports increased to £1,730m in 2023, according to Seafish (a public body supporting the UK seafood sector),

EXPORTS AND IMPORTS

How the UK figures for 2023 compare (from Seafish)

EXPORTS

44.5% of UK salmon is exported to France at a value of £296.8m.

27.7% of UK mackerel is exported to the Netherlands at a value of £35.61m.

78.3% of UK scallops are exported to France at a value of £71.24m.

IMPORTS

27.4% of imported cod comes from Iceland at a cost of £143m.

58.7% of imported salmon comes from Norway at a cost of £441.7m.

25.1% of imported shrimp comes from Vietnam at a cost of £142.7m.

the figure is still below the pre-Brexit exports of £2,004m in 2019. What these figures don't take into account, though, is the cultural and social value of fishing.

The UK coastline is a working museum of our fishing heritage. Small harbour towns and villages, communities built around the catching of fish and seafood, with knowledge and skills passed down through generations. The reason fishing proved emotive to the Brexit-voting public is due to its iconic identity. Millions of us visit those seaside settlements every year and find fascination in the boats, quayside bustle and array of species caught. There comes respect, too, for a way of life that is hard-earned and dangerous, the fishers forced to spend long periods away from home, knowing one slip could prove fatal.

Domestically, we do not appear to be very good at eating what is available. It may seem absurd, but that export



In Mevagissey, Cornwall, many local restaurants source their fresh fish and seafood directly from the local fishing fleet

“We eat paella in Spain that may be 70% Scottish seafood”

fishery in the Solent and the development of aquaculture in Poole Harbour. The harbour’s rich birdlife, including fish-eating ospreys and white-tailed eagles, illustrates the health of the environment.

Climate change will continue to bring fresh challenges to our fishing industry, with the increase of species such as bluefin tuna and black bream, while familiar species fade. The cod grounds in the southern part of the North Sea are diminishing, though they remain plentiful further north. From people within the fishing industry, the overwhelming sense is that our seas are productive and well-managed, although, as Macdonald reasons, we must adapt to what is plentiful.

Macdonald mentioned having recently eaten the tusk or cusk (*Brosme brosme*), a whitefish common in northern waters that made excellent eating but is a species barely targeted. Perhaps as consumers, we should become more adventurous. Don’t wait to go abroad before eating black bream, cuttlefish or octopus, certainly not when they may have been exported from the UK in the first place. And perhaps we should take the opportunity to engage with the fishers themselves, take an interest when we visit seaside harbours. That way, we might gain a sense of what is beneath the surface, rather than a fisher’s tale spun for a headline or two. **CP**

Thanks to Elspeth Macdonald, Pia Bateman, Sarah Birchenough, Ian Perkes and DEFRA for their time and advice in writing this piece.

figure of £1,730m is almost doubled by the value of imports. In 2023, we imported £3.446m of fish, due in part to cost, but also dietary choice. We are a nation fond of the familiar, preferring whitefish such as cod or haddock to the oiliness of mackerel or herring, or prawns farmed in Asia to langoustines or shrimp caught in our own waters. A further paradox might be drawn from a greater confidence to eat unusual seafood while abroad. As Elspeth Macdonald suggests, “We eat paella on holiday in Spain that might be 70% Scottish seafood.”

Changing a gastronomic culture will not be easy but may present the fishing industry with greater adaptability. This year has seen a bloom of octopus in the sea around south-west England, causing concern for fishers of crab, lobster and shellfish, but also presenting a glut that might be exploited. The octopuses had been raiding shellfish pots, entering through the side hatches that allow undersize shellfish to escape.

Some skippers have targeted the octopus, landing record quantities in the process. The Cornish trawler *Enterprise* landed £142,000 worth of octopus in a single catch in early June, although the vast majority were then sold abroad into France, Spain and Germany. Were the molluscs to find a demand in the UK, then fishers and merchants could make the most of this current abundance.

The main reason for the population boom is believed to be climate change, and the warming seas are bringing other species into UK waters. Pia Bateman, chief officer of the Southern Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority (IFCA), highlighted the need to manage the inshore population of black sea bream.

Until recently, black sea bream was considered an emerging population (newly appearing in UK waters). However, they are changing their habits and are now viewed as more established, remaining inshore where they influence the ecological make-up.

“We are developing a shared principles model of management with the fishers, which will be data-led by the industry,” Bateman explains, “Diversification and adaption is so important for the inshore fleet, and it is the fishers themselves who have first sight of ecosystem changes.”

WORKING TOGETHER

Although the fishing sector may have felt disillusioned following Brexit, Bateman feels that the *Fisheries Act 2020* has encouraged greater collaboration within the industry. It has enabled cooperative development of fisheries’ management plans and facilitated a more adaptive response to changing circumstances. This collaborative approach can be seen, within Southern IFCA, in the adaptive management of the emerging scallop



Kevin Parr is an angler, nature writer and naturalist. His new book *Unnatural History of Britain* (Flint/History Press) is out now.



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October

Q&A The big questions answered



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“The most common Irish name of all, Murphy, can be linked to several clans”

The tales associated with these names are straight out of *Game of Thrones*, full of fighting between royal Gaelic families and breakaway septs (from the Irish *sliocht*, meaning birth or line) of big clans.

The island of Ireland was once divided into many small kingdoms, as well as larger provinces, the main four being (as now) Leinster, Munster, Ulster and Connaught. Clan chiefs vied for control of these dominions, as well as for the loftiest position in the land: High King of Ireland.

The most common Irish name of all, Murphy, can be linked to several clans and people that used the moniker Mac Murchada (which derives from the Old Irish words for sea warrior, and was anglicised as Murphy), including the infamous Diarmait Mac Murchada. However, most surnames can be more accurately traced to a specific clan.

When a chieftain died, instead of the eldest son assuming the role, a new leader was elected from and by the higher ranks of the clan system. Sometimes a successor had already been pre-decided, and this heir-apparent/second in command was known as the *Tánaiste*. The hierarchy also helped determine property inheritance after a leader's death.

It wasn't unusual for the male siblings or sons of successful chieftains to break away and form their own clan or sept, which would then adopt a name relating to the founding patriarch. For this reason, Irish clans closely related by blood could have different names and

Diarmait Mac Murchada,
King of Leinster, meets
Anglo-Norman officers

What's the history of Irish clans?

Many people associate clans with Scotland, but the word originated in Ireland in the early Middle Ages. It derives from the Irish *clann*, meaning children, and is used to describe a highly organised hierarchal family grouping. A patriarchal kinship system, Irish clans were led by the male head of the family, the *Taoiseach* (a title still given to Ireland's Prime Minister), with the pecking order of other clan members

determined by their blood relationship to this chieftain.

The Irish diaspora began in earnest in the mid-19th century, when Ireland's population was cut in half by the Great Hunger, and over a million people fled the famine to seek safety overseas. As a result, Irish family names proliferated all over the world, from O'Brien to O'Neill, MacCarthy to Murphy. Most, if not all, can be traced to ancient clans.



An Irish sculpture of the 1607 Flight of the Earls, when Ireland's Gaelic order collapsed

co-exist, with members simultaneously having a claim to hierarchal status in the original clan.

BATTLING THE INVADERS

Outside Dublin (which became a Norse kingdom from 853 to 1170 AD), Irish dynasties repelled Viking invaders with success. And, although the Anglo-Normans conquered much of Ireland in the 12th century, the Gaelic clans fought back and reduced the extent of the English crown's control to Dublin and its immediate surrounds, beyond which various kings and clan chieftains held power until the 16th century.

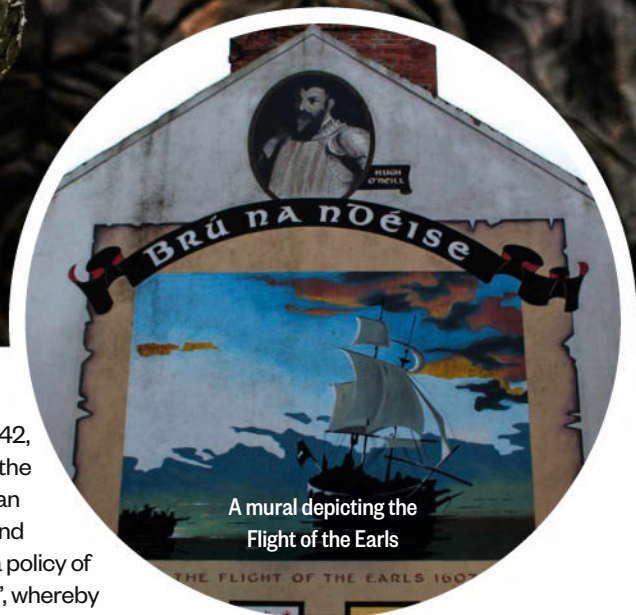
The Tudors were determined to gain control of the whole country, however, not least because of the religious connections between the

Major clans

Arguably, the six most prominent clans in Irish history are the Kavanaghs, O'Briens, MacCarthys, O'Connors, O'Donnells and O'Neills. To find out more on each, head to countryfile.com.

clans and Catholic nations in Europe. In 1542, Henry VIII established the Kingdom of Ireland as an English dependency, and attempted to impose a policy of 'surrender and regrant', whereby clans were forced or bribed into cutting kinship loyalties, accepting the English feudal system, giving up Brehon law and adopting English common law. Some chiefs acquiesced, but others resisted, ultimately leading to the Nine Years' War (1593–1603), when Irish leaders enlisted the support of Spain.

In 1601, when the English defeated the united forces of several big clans at the Battle of Kinsale, Ireland's traditional Gaelic order collapsed. The Elizabethan conquest followed



A mural depicting the Flight of the Earls

and in 1607, several high chiefs left Ireland with their leading kinsmen, in the Flight of the Earls.

The legacy of the clan system reverberates through Irish history and culture still. The main names still exist, various authorities keep records about who holds what title, and millions of people of Irish extraction all over the world can trace their family lines right back to where they began, with the country's clans. **Pat Kinsella**

2

How do my movement needs change as I age?

As time passes, the adage “move it or lose it” becomes ever more relevant. But your body’s needs and, therefore, the best exercise routines change, sometimes dramatically, from one decade to the next.

YOUR 30s

Your 30s are the time to build a solid foundation for the future. Many of us become busier at work or with family commitments, so it’s easy to let flexibility and natural movement slide. Yet, maintaining and improving mobility is essential for joint health, good posture and injury prevention in later years. Exercises that keep joints

healthy also boost muscle strength, range of motion and flexibility.

Regularly including mobility training, even just 10 minutes per day, can reduce stiffness, enhance posture and lower the risk of injury, setting you up for better athletic performance and healthier ageing.

Recommended exercises

- **Dynamic stretching** (arm circles, leg swings)
- **Hip openers** (such as deep lunges)
- **Torso rotations**
- **Yoga flows and Pilates**
- **Simple bodyweight movements** (squats, lunges).

Bespoke approach

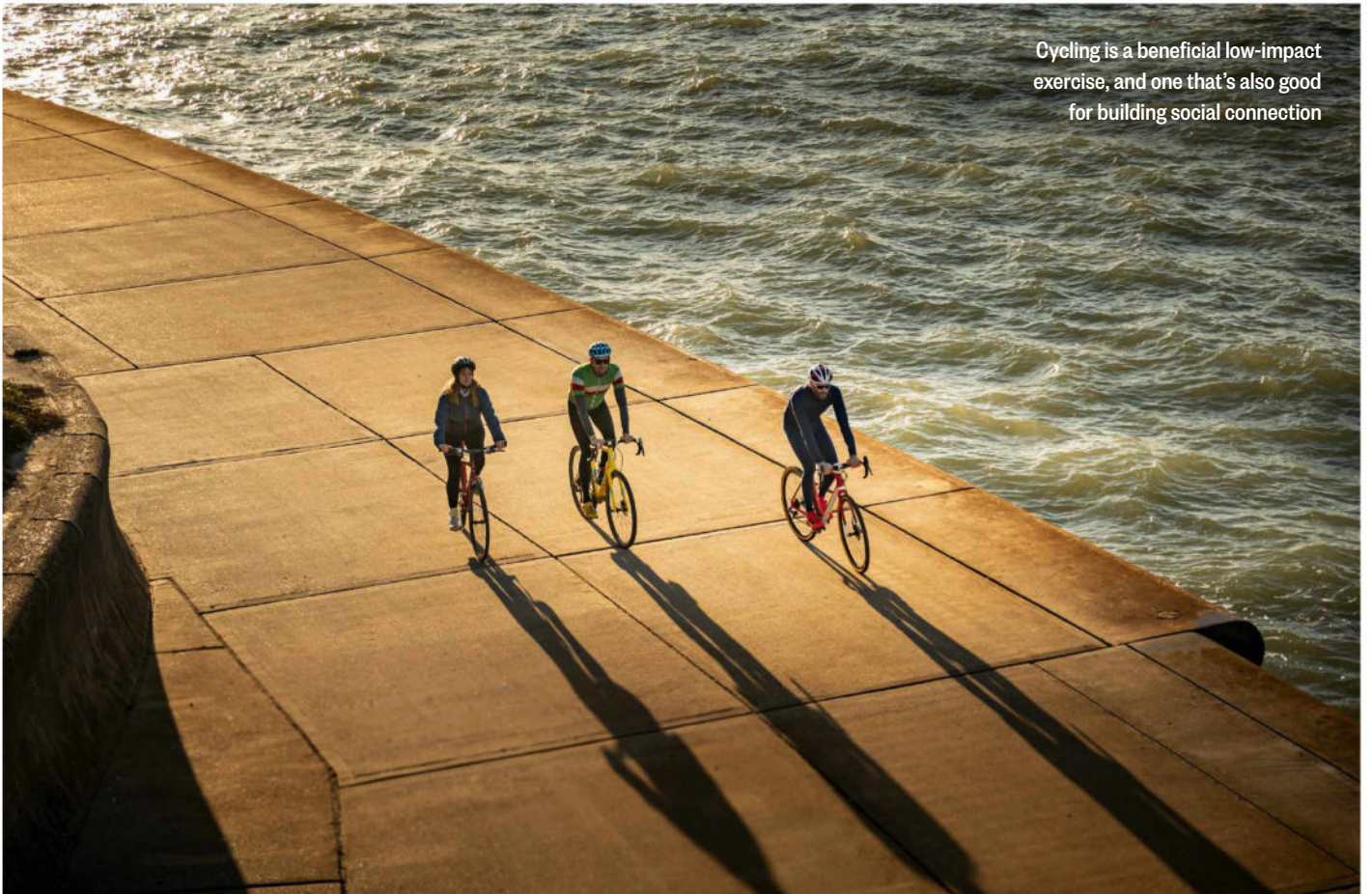
By knowing how your exercise priorities should shift across the decades, you can boost your vitality and minimise injury for a lifetime of active living.

YOUR 40s

As we enter our 40s, subtle changes occur in muscle mass and bone density. While you can still push your fitness, shifting focus to endurance and moderate resistance work can keep your heart and muscles strong, while lowering the risk of injury or overuse. Recent studies have highlighted the benefit of gentler, longer sessions for cardiovascular wellbeing, such as steady-paced jogging or brisk walking, which can reduce blood pressure as effectively as high-intensity interval training.

Endurance workouts are also linked with improved mood and

Cycling is a beneficial low-impact exercise, and one that’s also good for building social connection





Gardening is excellent exercise in all stages of life but particularly during your 60s and 70s

“Aim for activities that help build confidence and joy in your 60s and 70s”

better cognitive performance. Resistance training stays important, especially for women undergoing menopausal changes, to defend against bone loss and osteoporosis.

Recommended exercises

- Brisk walking or jogging
- Swimming and cycling (low impact on joints)
- Group classes featuring light weights or resistance bands
- Bodyweight strengthening routines
- Hiking in nature

YOUR 50s

Around the fifth decade, the body experiences a natural loss in muscle mass in a process called sarcopenia.

Strength and resistance training therefore become priorities; research shows it can help rebuild muscle, recharge metabolism, reduce fat, support joint health and even lower blood-sugar levels.

Lifting weights or doing resistance exercises at least two or three times per week helps to counteract the rate of muscle loss after 50. Benefits extend to increased confidence, stamina and metabolism, and evidence shows that regular strength training can slow and sometimes reverse age-related bone loss.

Be sure to balance intensity with recovery, as the body's healing slows with age, and include low-impact cardio, such as cycling or swimming.

Recommended exercises

- Weight training (machines, free weights, resistance bands)
- Functional movements (sit-to-stand, step-ups)
- Pilates and yoga (improves strength and balance)
- Swimming (for joint-friendly resistance)
- Bodyweight exercises (push-ups on a wall, squats, lunges).

Healthy living

A longevity and healthy ageing coach, Darren Morris uses a lifestyle-first approach to help people slow biological ageing. inochi longevity.com

YOUR 60s ONWARDS

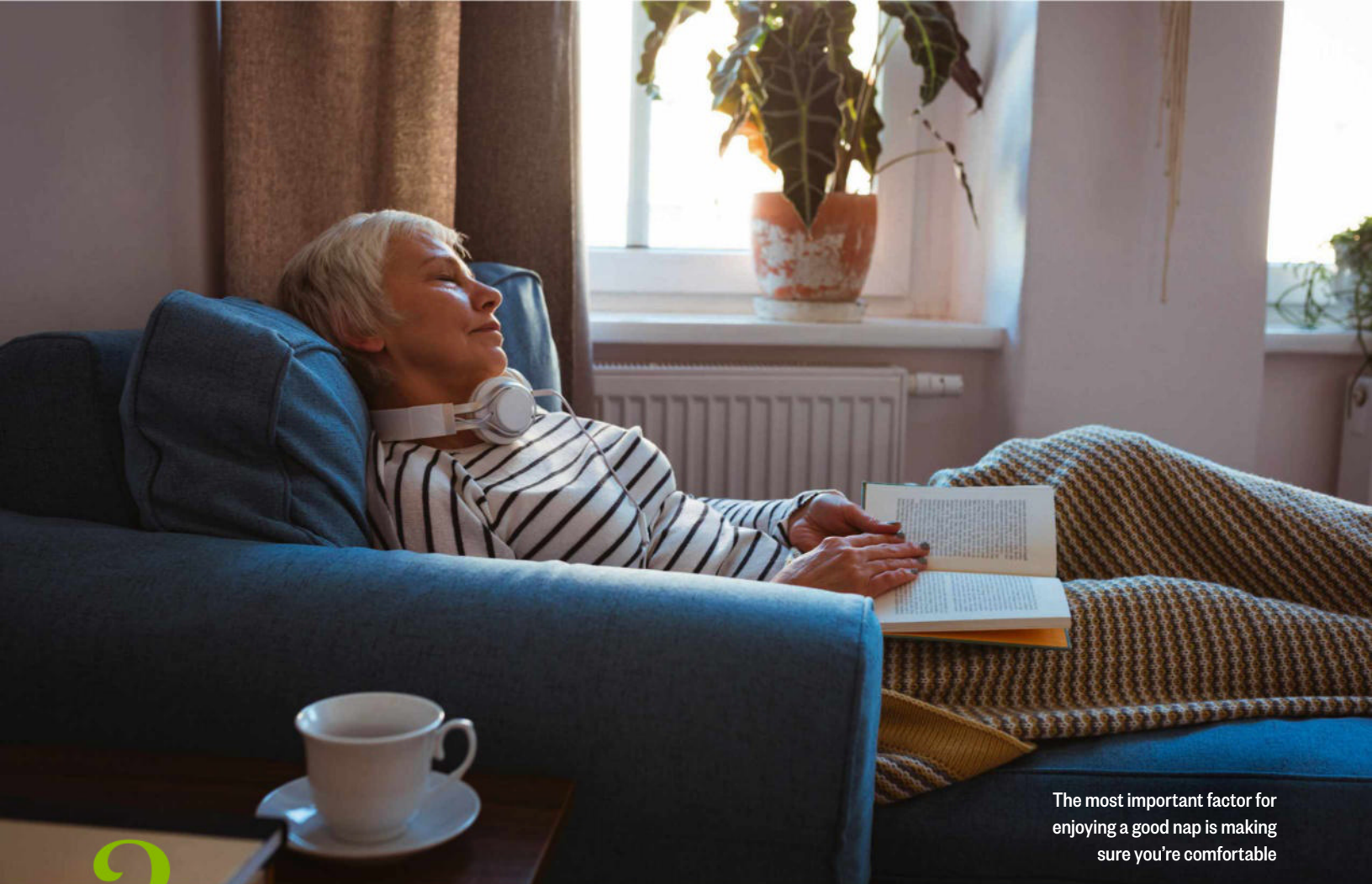
In your 60s, 70s and beyond, preventing falls, staying independent and warding off frailty are top priorities. Balance and coordination exercises are shown to vastly reduce risk of falls, which is one of the leading causes of injury in people over 65.

Regular practice of balance and stability moves keeps core muscles strong and reflexes sharp. Also, research indicates that physical activity at this stage can slow cognitive decline and reduce the risk of Alzheimer's and dementia. Aim for activities that help build confidence, social connection and joy.

Recommended exercises

- Heel-to-toe walking
- One-leg stands (holding on to a chair for support)
- Side leg raises
- Tai Chi or gentle yoga
- Seated or standing calf raises
- Marching in place
- Walking, gardening and gentle hiking
- Swimming and cycling (for joint-friendly activity)

Darren Morris



The most important factor for enjoying a good nap is making sure you're comfortable

3

What's the perfect environment for a nap?

Firstly, it's clearly easier to nap at home than at work. That said, companies are increasingly setting up specific napping areas in search of improved performance. Google's London office reportedly has on-site sleep pods, complete with cashmere eye masks. Of course, napping isn't a new, business-led concept, and Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill and Napoleon Bonaparte were all known nappers.

Why should you nap? To digest a heavy Ploughman's lunch? Not necessarily. It's true that we endure a mid-afternoon slump, but this occurs whether you've eaten or not. It's down to circadian rhythms, where our various physiological systems follow a 24-hour flow of ups and downs, including body temperature, which peaks in the early evening and hits a trough a couple of hours before you wake in the morning. However, there's also a natural dip between 1pm and 3pm, called the post-prandial dip. This drop in body

temperature causes sleepiness, exacerbated if you've had a poor night's kip. That's why this is the ideal time to take a nap. And it's worth it – studies show naps improve task competence, memory and alertness.

A wealth of studies show that around 10 to 20 minutes is the optimum napping time. Thirty minutes is fine, too, but any longer can impair your subsequent night's sleep. In fact, longer naps are also associated with later meal times and increased food consumption, with a 2023 study in *Obesity: The Journal of The Obesity Society* revealing that longer nappers tended to have a higher body mass index, larger waists and higher blood pressure.

Importantly, you don't need to fall into a deep slumber to enjoy the benefits. Simply switching off your mind is fine.

IDEAL CONDITIONS

Key for a mid-afternoon nap is comfort. A bed is the obvious one

Wake up call
Some nappers are fans of a 'nappuccino', where you consume a caffeinated drink before you nap. Caffeine takes about 20 minutes to start having an effect, which will leave you energised once your nap is over.

but some experts recommend a sofa instead to avoid oversleeping. If you're at work, just leaning back in your chair will help, although this may not be feasible while your colleagues chomp away at their meal deal. Looser-fitting apparel is preferable over tight clothing.

The room temperature should be around 16–19°C to support the body's natural sleep-inducing drop in temperature. Tricky in a heatwave but, for most of the year, this should be doable. Socks – off or on – are good for temperature regulation.

Though you don't need to fall asleep, the ideal is that you try, which means darkness is preferred over light. An eye mask is useful, as well as closing the curtains. Some benefit from relaxing sounds (cue 'Sound Escapes' on the *BBC Countryfile Magazine* Podcast), while others briefly drift to scents like lavender. After a nap, grab five minutes to regain your senses and hydrate with a glass of water. **James Witts**

4

How much should I exercise my puppy?

As a vet, I'm often asked how much exercise to give puppies and when it becomes too much for their developing bones. Most owners are keen to get their puppies outside, and socialising puppies is key for having a well-rounded adult dog.

The socialisation window is from three to 12 weeks, during which time they're more receptive to new sounds, smells, people, places and animals. As they're not vaccinated

for much of this time, there is a risk, but they can interact with vaccinated dogs and new people.

Puppies are full of fun, and can be good at self-regulating as long as they're allowed to rest. Giving them a safe space to relax in is important. Once they're vaccinated, you'll want to go on more formal walks. Here are my five tips to stop your puppy becoming bored while ensuring they socialise and develop healthy bones.

Taking care
Overexercising growing dogs can affect bone and joint development and lead to permanent damage, so be sure not to overdo it.

PLAY

For younger puppies, mental and physical stimulus throughout the day is the best way they can socialise, learn and grow. It's a great way to bond with them, teach essential commands and spoil them with new toys. But remember to give them time out.

WALKS

Don't expect to go far or fast; let them explore their surroundings and sniff every bush. When they get tired pick them up. Slowly build up walks over time, and don't run with your dog until they're fully mature – this can be anything from nine months for small breeds to two years for larger ones.

SAFE SPACES

Some puppies aren't the best at recognising the need for time out, so it may need to be enforced. Giving them their own space where they can relax away from other animals and humans can benefit them. A covered crate in a cool part of the house creates a safe environment.

DIET

The other factor that affects bone and joint health and development is diet: a complete puppy food is essential to ensure growth and minimise the risk of developmental problems such as hip dysplasia.

THINGS TO AVOID

Avoid stairs until at least 12 weeks old if possible and skip high-impact exercise, such as jumping and running, until they're fully grown. It's fine to let your puppy run around in the garden and play, but ensure they take breaks. **Graham Lewis, Paragon Veterinary Group (paragonvet.com)**

Dog toys are a great way to help energetic puppies learn, develop and, of course, have fun



A Cavapoochon puppy frolics in the leaves

5

Are new insect dangers just round the corner?

Asian or yellow-legged hornets are making headlines after being regularly spotted in Kent over the last few years. Its sting is no worse than that of the docile European hornet, but its propensity to attack honeybees has raised it to pariah status. There have long been worries that other major nuisance pests might get to Britain if alterations in weather patterns and climate change continue. The reasoning is that many of these pests prefer warmer climates and the British Isles' reputation as a cold, wet archipelago is no longer holding true. The truth is complicated, however.

Climate is an all-year-round thing, and just because there has been a hot spring does not necessarily mean there will be a wholesale invasion. To become fully established, any colonising species needs to mate, breed and overwinter here. Simply hopping the English Channel to Kent is no guarantee of triumphant conquest if the dull rains of autumn give you fungal disease (an important killer of overwintering insects) or the next spring arrives much later than your Mediterranean body clock got you up for, and you can't find anything to eat.

Nevertheless, we shouldn't be complacent. The Asian giant hornet, another native of east and south-east Asia, somehow got to the Pacific Northwest of North America in 2019. It's the largest social wasp in the world, measuring up to 50mm long. This one is highly unlikely to manage trans-continental travel to Europe but, if a stowaway came in with freight, it might find our climate conducive. Again, it's not necessarily more aggressive or dangerous than other wasps or hornets, but it also attacks honeybees.

It may come as a surprise to many that malaria used to occur in Britain – this was the ague of the Essex and Kent marshes. It was never rife, and drainage of the mosquito larvae's ditch haunts and the discovery of quinine treatment meant the last recorded case was during the 1890s. However, it came back when infected soldiers returning from both world wars convalesced in Kent, and the local mosquitoes picked it up from them. Again, ditch clearance and DDT got things back under control. But it does show that native British mosquitoes are quite capable of transmitting the disease if they can find a malaria carrier.

Another problem on the horizon may be dengue, because one of its best-known carriers, the Asian tiger mosquito, is now common in southern Europe, and has been shipped all round the world as larvae breeding in the water slops in recycled tyres, for which there's a booming international trade. It's a decidedly urban species, with a propensity to come indoors and is known for being an aggressive biter. If it gets established here that doesn't mean the disease will arrive, but it does make it one step closer.

The most important take is that new things arrive in Britain every year. Some survive the season, they may even breed here, but then they succumb to winter and disappear again. Others become established but are soon subsumed into the general ecology of a place and become part of the natural food-webs, with no serious knock-on effects. Only a very few go on to reach pest proportions and only a very, very, few have any serious detrimental effects on humans.

Richard Jones



6 Is my sunscreen PFAS-free?

Many cosmetics and sunscreens contain PFAS (or ‘forever chemicals’) that have been linked to various health problems. This is worrying, as recent University of Birmingham research has found these chemicals may be absorbed directly through the skin. You are most likely to find PFAS in waterproof formulas and in chemical – rather than mineral – sun-protection products.

Abi Weeds at organic skincare brand Odylique says it’s possible to formulate sunscreen without PFAS. “There’s a wealth of alternatives that provide similar conditioning and



Organic sunscreens don’t include forever chemicals

smoothing effects,” she says. “Waterproofing is achievable by using water-free formulae and/or natural plant waxes.”

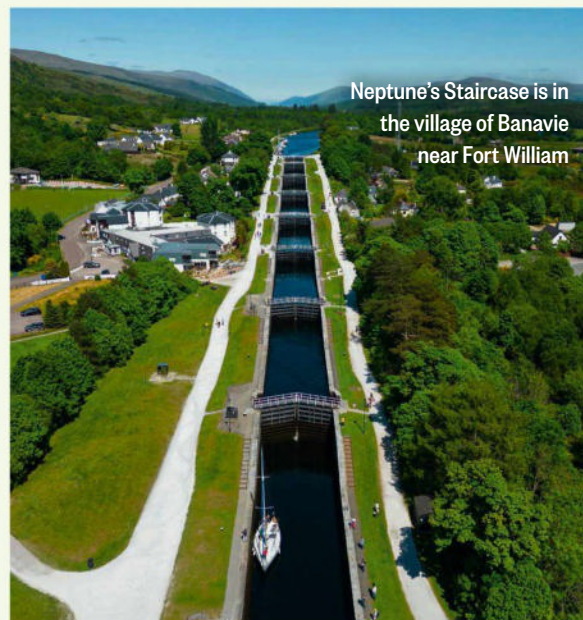
It’s worth scanning ingredients and avoiding products that include words beginning perfluoro- or polyfluoro- or the acronyms PTFE or PAPS. Not all display their ingredients, so choose brands that are clear about what their products contain. **Sam Pyrah**

Easy swap
Certified organic skincare is guaranteed not to include PFAS or PFAS-associated ingredients.

7 What is the UK’s longest staircase canal lock?

Of all the great countryside controversies, the debate in the pages of *BBC Countryfile Magazine* over which is Britain’s longest set of staircase locks on a canal is one of the fiercest. It stems from Tim Relf’s travel piece on Leicestershire (February), in which a caption written by the editorial team claimed Foxton Locks on the Grand Union Canal for the title. Since then, readers have put forth Caen Hill on the Kennet and Avon in Wiltshire, Tardebigge Locks on the Worcester and Birmingham Canal, and Neptune’s Staircase on the Caledonian Canal in Scotland.

Everything depends on how you define your terms. Strictly, a staircase lock is one where each lock directly opens into the one above or below it – ie one lock’s lower gates are the upper gates of the next lock. Foxton has two sets of five staircase locks but the sets are separated by a



Neptune’s Staircase is in the village of Banavie near Fort William

short stretch of water known as a ‘pound’. Caen Hill has 29 locks and Tardebigge has 30, but, crucially, these are separated by pounds and so are not staircase locks. The longest single flight of staircase locks is Neptune’s Staircase, comprising eight locks over a quarter of a mile. Hopefully, that’s the dispute settled!

Fergus Collins

Key facts
Finished in 1822, Neptune’s Staircase in Scotland raises the canal 19m and takes 90 minutes or so to navigate.

Masterclass

Embrace cold-water swimming



Boosting your mood, immune system, circulation and fitness levels, the benefits of cold-water swimming are immense. Here are our insider tips to get you started

Words: Nicola K Smith



Nicola K Smith is a journalist, editor and copywriter based in the open-water swimming honeypot of Falmouth in Cornwall.

1 Go together

As Dr Mark Harper, cold-water swimmer and author of *Chill: The Cold Water Swimming Cure* says, there are two main benefits to group swimming. The first is safety, the second is the social buzz. "Social isolation is associated with both mental and physical ill health; it has also been shown that group activities generate health benefits." Doing something challenging as a group strengthens social bonds and enhances health-boosting effects.





2

Start before winter

Starting your cold-water dipping in summer or autumn is advisable, allowing you to gradually acclimatise as the water temperature drops. “You don’t need to plunge straight in mid-winter,” says Makala Jones, head swim coach and a director of Bluetits Chill Swimmers, which has 150 cold-water swimming groups worldwide with around 150,000 members. “The best way is to swim regularly as the water cools down in autumn; your body gets used to it bit by bit.” But if you do start in winter, begin with short dips. “Literally a minute or two at first, then build from there,” says Jones.

4

Focus on your breathing

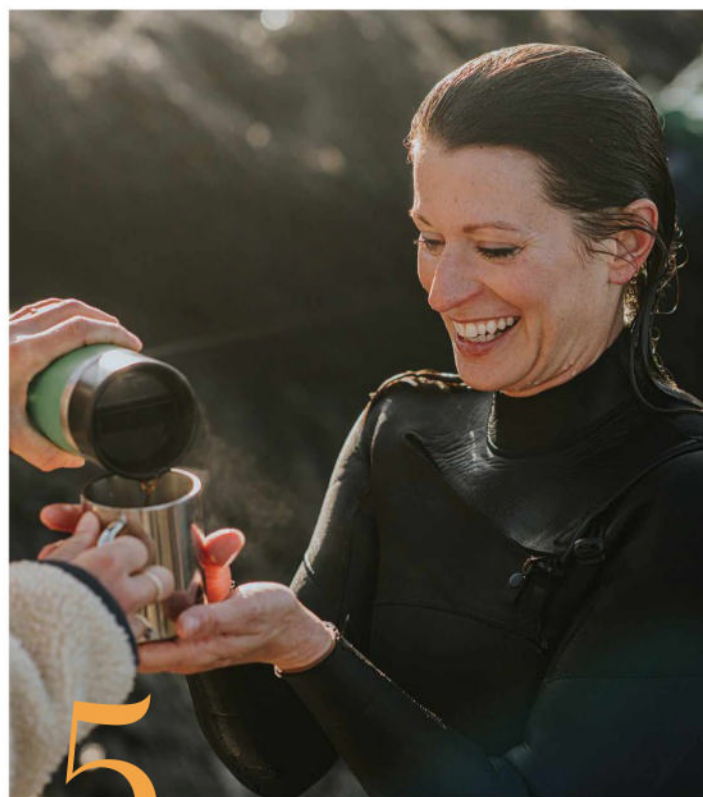
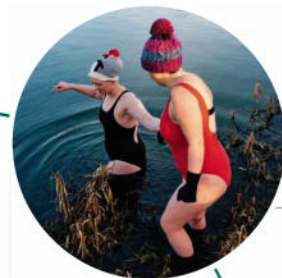
Adapting to the cold water before winter makes it easier to focus on your breathing. Harper says swimming in temperatures under 20°C in summer and autumn is sufficient to start to attenuate the cold-shock response. This means “the intense hyperventilation and feeling of panic” should be manageable when the water temperatures really drop.



3

Give it a chance

As Rod Stewart nearly sang, the second plunge is the coldest, so commit to a few swims before you start. “The second time is always the worst,” says Harper. “You have become ever so slightly complacent after the first time but you haven’t yet started to adapt. So give it at least three goes (and preferably six) before you decide whether it’s for you. Fix some times and do it with friends.”



5

Get warm, get chatting

Get out, get dry and get warm. Bringing a flask of hot drink with you has psychological and social benefits. Nic Shermon swims with a female group ranging in age from their 40s to late 70s in Falmouth, Cornwall. “Since lockdown, between five and nine of us meet daily, usually very early mornings, throughout summer and winter. We swim, dress, sit on the beach, have our flasks of coffee and put the world to rights. I really enjoy the camaraderie.”

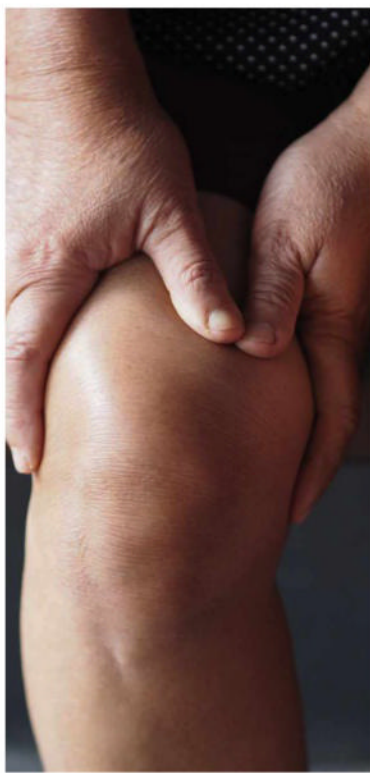


6 Give your brain a break

Cold-water swimming is a form of meditation, says Jones. “Yes, it’s cold – but that’s part of the joy!” She adds that the mental benefits are huge. “It gives your head a proper reset. Whatever’s going on in life, stepping into chilly water focuses your mind on one simple thing: the moment you’re in. The chatter in your head gets swapped for shared laughter, squeals and the feeling of being alive.” As Shermon says, “When I swim, my mind doesn’t wander. I think of nothing else but being in the moment.”

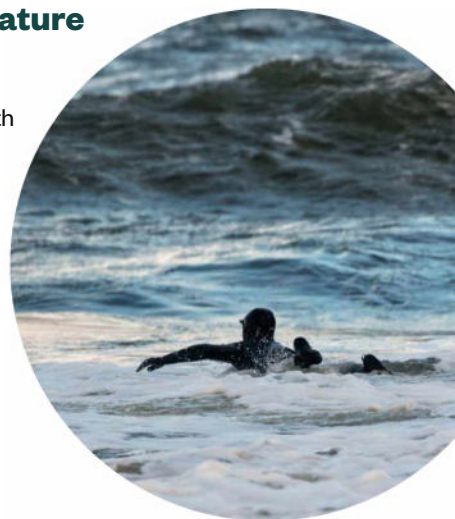
7 Boost your body

Studies have proven that cold-water immersion can cause hormesis – an adaptive response of organisms and cells to moderate, intermittent stress – giving swimmers the physical and mental ability to endure future stresses. As Jones says: “Physically, regular cold-water swimming can boost circulation, help with aches and pains, and give your immune system a little nudge. Plus, you’ll find yourself braving things you never thought you would. That confidence leaks into the rest of your life.”



8 Be at one with nature

Cold-water swimming involves communing with nature, and the sea in particular provides an ever-changing backdrop. “No two days are alike,” says Shermon. “Sometimes the sea is angry – you always have to respect the conditions. Yet on other days it can feel like I’m swimming through silk.”





9

Breaking barriers

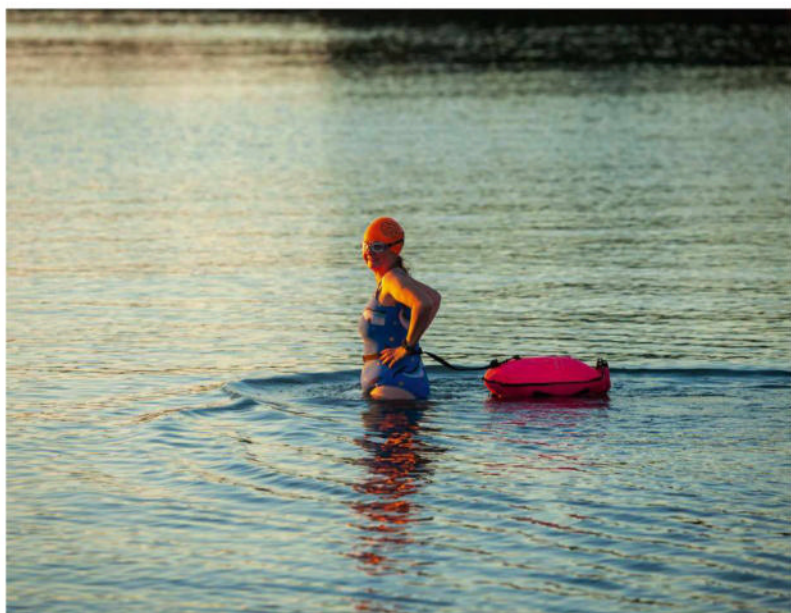
Cold-water swimming commonly breaks down a multitude of barriers, from overcoming fear – of cold water and of facing a new challenge – to shedding hang ups

about physical appearance. Jones says, “We gather as strangers and leave as friends. No one cares what you look like in your cossie or how far you swim.”

10

Get kitted up

A costume, towel and hot drink are the bare necessities, while a tow float provides important visibility and buoyancy for swimmers venturing beyond the shallows. Jones says: “Wear whatever makes you comfortable. Some of us go skins, others wear wetsuits, gloves, hats, socks. The key is to get out before you get too cold and warm up properly after.” 

**COLD-WATER KIT**

Our picks of what to wear in the water this winter

**HUUB APHOTIC SWIM GOGGLE, £29.99**

huubdesign.com

These polarised goggles adapt to contrasting light conditions to boost visibility in the water.

We found them especially handy for early morning and evening swims.

**ZONE3 ACTIVE-FLEX WETSUIT, £189**

zone3.com

This durable and versatile suit has flexible 2mm shoulders. The reduced buoyancy in the legs also helps keep the feet submerged in the water for a more efficient breaststroke leg kick.

**ALPKIT NORI TOW FLOAT, £29.99**

Tied around the waist, a tow float is an important piece of kit for open-water visibility. The Nori also has an internal waterproof pocket for storing valuables when you're out on the water.

Kit Waterproof jackets

Read the
full reviews on
countryfile.com



Can a jacket shield you from the rain but remain breathable inside? We put four waterproof contenders to the test in the wettest of weather

Words: Leonie Helm; Karen Eatock; Paul McGuinness



ARC'TERYX BETA SL

£450, [ARCTERYX.COM](https://arcteryx.com) ★★★★★★

Despite its light 300g weight, the Beta SL (also in men's sizes) delivers excellent waterproofing and wind resistance thanks to its Gore-Tex build. The helmet-compatible hood, pit zips and well-placed pockets make it practical for hiking, climbing and general use, while the flattering fit is roomy and unrestrictive.

The 28,000mm hydrostatic head (HH) waterproof rating is high and it's PFC-free, but that quality doesn't come cheap. **LH**



BERGHAUS SUMMIT SEEKER

£360, [BERGHAUS.COM](https://berghaus.com) ★★★★★★

The stylish if pricey Summit's hefty 28,000mm waterproof rating has kept me dry in prolonged downpours. The Gore-Tex ePE material is free of PFAS, is light (472g) and breathability is aided by underarm vents. The adjustable, wired hood resolutely stays in place but I would've liked a longer peak.

There are two sizeable pockets and an internal compartment, but a chest pocket is absent. Also available in men's sizes. **KE**



FINISTERRE STORMBIRD

£250, [FINISTERRE.COM](https://finisterre.com) ★★★★★★

The flattering Stormbird is a great all-rounder that has kept me protected whatever the weather. At 629g, it's not the lightest, but that took nothing away from the comfort. Details include a stiffened peak hood, high-set pockets for use with rucksack straps and an ergonomic cut. The three-layer recycled, PFAS-free fabric, two-way zip and taped seams give it serious 20,000mm waterproofing. Also in men's sizes. **LH**



CRAGHOPPERS PONSA WATERPROOF

£70, [CRAGHOPPERS.COM](https://craghoppers.com) ★★★★★★

Even in the extreme environment of Canada's Great Bear Rainforest, one of Earth's wettest places, the 500g Ponsa was comfy and kept me bone dry (the waterproof rating is a mighty 30,000mm). The breathable, stretchy, wind-resistant membrane has also been ideal for my daily cycling commute.

It's made from recycled polyester and free from PFAS, and comes with a welcome price tag. It's men's only, however. **PM**



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Very few remaining
from the 200 made.



YOUR PHOTOS

Share your best photographs of the British countryside with us and you could see your image published in print or online.

Email your images to photos@countryfile.com

REGAL VIEW

By: Ben Fenton

Where: Waltham St
Lawrence, Berkshire

"I was working at home when I noticed a magnificent red kite perched atop a conifer, bathed in sunlight. I hurried for my camera, and just as I was ready, it lifted into the air, offering me this extraordinary moment in flight. Of the wildlife photos I've taken, it's probably my favourite."





◀ SHOUT OUT

By: Jamie Lawless

Where: Tatton Park, Cheshire

"This was my favourite photo of the day. This tired stag had a large number of females and had spent the majority of his day chasing off younger males still trying their luck after the main rut had all but finished."

▼ FLOATING ON

By: John Dear

Where: Trent and Mersey Canal, Findern, South Derbyshire

"A walk along the towpath beside the Trent and Mersey Canal is delightful in autumn. This boat came into view at just the right moment and I was able to capture it disturbing the reflections in the water."



Country puzzles

COUNTRYSIDE QUIZ

Answers at the bottom of page 96



European eels change their appearance and colour through each of their five life stages

1. The tree-flanked doors of St Edward's Church in Stow-on-the-Wold are said to have inspired which author's 'Doors of Durin'?

- ☐ a. JRR Tolkien
- ☐ b. JK Rowling
- ☐ c. Philip Pullman
- ☐ d. CS Lewis

2. Who believed eels to be born "from the entrails of the earth"?

- ☐ a. Pliny the Elder
- ☐ b. Aristotle
- ☐ c. Hippocrates
- ☐ d. Herodotus

3. What was mined at Grime's Graves in Norfolk?

- ☐ a. Salt
- ☐ b. Tin
- ☐ c. Flint
- ☐ d. Iron

4. What percentage of UK scallops are exported to France?

- ☐ a. 32%
- ☐ b. 51%
- ☐ c. 63%
- ☐ d. 78%

5. Who wrote "There is not a finer county in England than Derbyshire"?

- ☐ a. Thomas Hardy
- ☐ b. Emily Brontë
- ☐ c. Jane Austen
- ☐ d. Charles Dickens

6. The Wall in *Game of Thrones* was inspired by which UK structure?

- ☐ a. Chester City Walls
- ☐ b. Berwick on Tweed's Elizabethan Walls
- ☐ c. Hadrian's Wall
- ☐ d. The London Wall

7. What is a Welsh Border fan?

- ☐ a. A Welsh Marches enthusiast
- ☐ b. A breed of dog
- ☐ c. A traditional pasty
- ☐ d. A corn dolly

8. *Brosme brosme* is the Latin name for which aquatic species?

- ☐ a. Tusk/cusk
- ☐ b. Black sea bream
- ☐ c. Cuttlefish
- ☐ d. European eel

9. Who is "especially fond of" treacle tart, according to cookery writer Mrs Beeton?

- ☐ a. Queen Victoria
- ☐ b. Children
- ☐ c. Londoners
- ☐ d. Herself

10. Who starred alongside Keira Knightley in the film adaptation of *Atonement*?

- ☐ a. Benedict Cumberbatch
- ☐ b. Daniel Craig
- ☐ c. Eddie Redmayne
- ☐ d. James McAvoy

11. Where do European eels spawn?

- ☐ a. North Sea
- ☐ b. Sargasso Sea
- ☐ c. Mediterranean Sea
- ☐ d. Baltic Sea

12. Who is the guest judge appearing alongside John Craven and Hamza Yassin on this year's *Countryfile Calendar* competition?

- ☐ a. Maggie Aderin-Pocock
- ☐ b. Mary-Ann Ochota
- ☐ c. Miranda Krestovnikoff
- ☐ d. Mya-Rose Craig

13. What did John Constable train as before becoming a painter?

- ☐ a. Landscape gardener
- ☐ b. Miller
- ☐ c. Architect
- ☐ d. Teacher

14. The leaf of which tree is pictured below?

- ☐ a. Horse chestnut
- ☐ b. Rowan
- ☐ c. Alder
- ☐ d. Field maple



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Celebrity APEX

COUNTRYSIDE CROSSWORD

by Eddie James

ACROSS

1 Autumnal countryside activity (7)

5 Purloin... part of a horse's bridle (7)

10 Yorkshire market town in the heart of James Herriot country (6)
11 Country location of Ballyhoura Way (7)

12 World's first gardener? (4)

14 One who lives nearby... a pub (5)

15 Nutrient-rich soil, partly Anglo-American (4)

16 Routine, worldly... Anne plastered with mud! (7)

17 East Yorkshire village with windmill – in dusk I'd bypass (6)

19 One's calling: to rush wildly? (6)

21/23 Wiltshire SSSI arboreal area renowned for butterflies – we let nobody out! (7, 4)

25 Used by e.g. pig for foraging/digging (5)

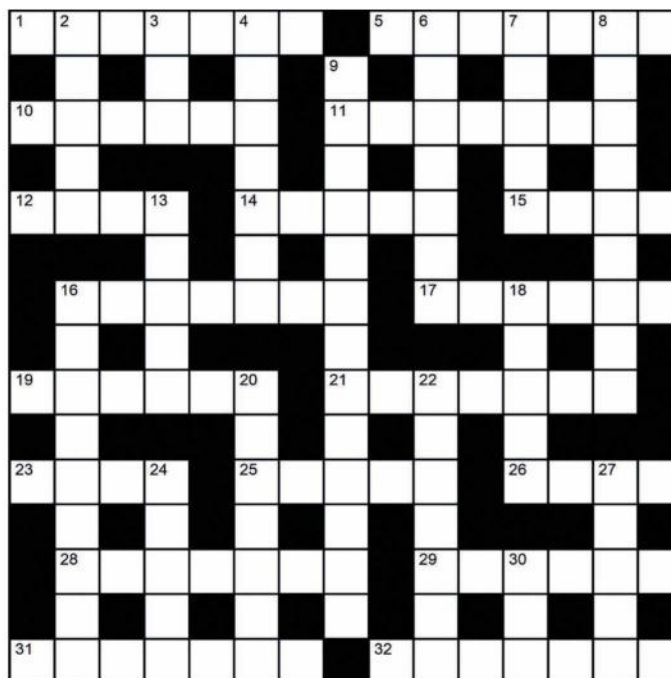
26 Like a domesticated animal (4)

28 Thames Estuary marshes – part of terrain, Hampshire (7)

29 Relating to horses (6)

31 Somerset hill range – chaps get buffet items (7)

32 These tree fruits provide a cracking game for kids! (7)



DOWN

2 Sap-sucking insect, e.g. blackfly (5)

3 St Albans' river – part of Severn! (3)

4 World Heritage Site, most westerly of Outer Hebrides (2, 5)

6 Rock stacks off the Isle of Wight (7)

7 Corn-threshing tool (5)

8 Devon beach with sandstone stacks – a ram badly damaged (6, 3)

9 Tree's cluster growths resembling birds' nests (7, 6)

13 Britain's most common whale

– in stream in Kendal! (5)

16 Tall wildflower, with yellow sepals – we, um, adore madly! (6, 3)

18 E.g. Fastnet or Rockall (5)

20 An eglantine's fruit – pink and trendy (7)

22 Target of balanced carbon emissions – an unsuccessful angler's result? (3, 4)

24 Hay is grass that has been cut and __ (5)

27 Sort of Roman country house? (5)

30 River on Beacons Way: not quite twilight (3)

CROSSWORD SOLUTIONS

AUGUST

ACROSS: 1 Rabbit 5 Kingcup
 9 Creepers 10 Orange
 11/18D Flow Country 12 Gorse
 13 Pear 14 Foxtail 15 Chrome
 16 Bridle 20 Kiln 21 Churr
 22 Ryde 24 Gaiter 25 Tarn
 Hows 27 Dursley 28 Morass

DOWN: 2 April 3 Beeswax
 4/18A The Cobbler 5 Kestrel
 6 Moose 7 Clapper 8 Pig
 farmer 12 Grape 14 Forsinard
 15 Caber 17 Dunster
 19 Lurcher 21 Coral
 23 Downs 26 Rum.

SEPTEMBER

ACROSS: 1 Shag
 4 Cockchafer 9 Grieve
 10 Andover 11 Mist 12 Teifi
 13 Stem 14 Torridge 16 Grunt
 18 Epsom 20 Lavender
 22 UCRs 25 Clip 26 Machair
 28 Ramsar 29 Nurseryman
 30 Ards

DOWN: 2 Herbivore
 3/4 Great crested 5 Chalice
 6 Codling 7 ATV 8 Eyrie
 13/24 Spurn Point 15 Roses
 17 The Lizard 19 Mop fair
 20 Leitrim 21 Veteran
 23 Cymru 25 Comma 27 Cos.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE



The only British mammal to have a prehensile tail that can grasp and hold, the harvest mouse is omnivorous, eating berries, seeds, insects and sometimes moss and fungi. Can you spot the five differences between these photos? See page 97 for the answers.

Your countryside

HAVE YOUR SAY ON RURAL ISSUES

Share your views and opinions by writing to us at:

Have your say: *BBC Countryfile Magazine*, Eagle House, Bristol BS1 4ST; or email editor@countryfile.com, tweet us [@CountryfileMag](https://twitter.com/CountryfileMag) or via Facebook facebook.com/countryfilemagazine

*We reserve the right to edit correspondence



Many drone flyers take advantage of the wide open spaces around Stanage Edge in the Peak District National Park

DRONES DISTURB THE PEACE

I live on the edge of the Peak District and often walk along the Gritstone Edges, such as at Stanage and Froggatt. I see more and more people using drones, presumably to film or just to fly as a recreational activity.

I think drone flying in the Peak District should be seen as undesirable. The buzzing of drones disturbs the peace and quiet; the flight of the drones can be disruptive and disturbing to wildlife, particularly as the flight of a drone can often mimic the flight of birds of prey.

People using drones that I have spoken to have no understanding of the rules around the flying of drones. Stanage Edge is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and drone flying is not allowed, yet people still fly them, either unaware of the regulations or disregarding them.

I think drone flying will become a major problem and a threat to tranquility of the national parks. I contacted the Peak Park Authority who told me they simply didn't have the staff to patrol the park in an effective way.

Countryfile often uses drones in the production of programmes. I presume it uses licenced pilots and keeps within the rules of flying as set out by the Civil Aviation Authority. I wonder if the programme takes into consideration other countryside users who may be disturbed by drones?

Kevin Marsden, via email

ANIMAL CRUELTY AWARENESS

Countryfile sells calendars in aid of BBC Children In Need and also hosts a countryside ramble for the same purpose,

raising millions every year. Why doesn't *BBC Countryfile Magazine* host a regular fundraising event for animals, nature and animal charities? There is so much appalling cruelty, lack of respect and abhorrent treatment of animals globally.

To raise awareness of all animal cruelty in the UK and to assist with creating a kinder, better environment for domestic and wild animals, pets, livestock and horses, greyhounds and other animals used for 'sport', can only be a good thing. I'm certain many people would support such an event.

Ali Johnson, North Devon

SUNSET ON STIRRUP CRAG

Creative nature writing is a new hobby of mine that has really helped me become mindful on my walks. I wrote the below to accompany this photo, taken on the Mosedale Horseshoe walk in the Lake District on a sunny winter's day.

The transition from day to night is a special time. Leaving a unique stillness in the air, low light and mysterious shadows. The true wonders of the world may only show themselves in the shadows. The array of light cast out is unknown day by day, that gives us the element of alluring surprise. Nature is always there to show us something new, something that cannot be replicated on another day. This is what makes each view so extraordinary, magical and moving for the soul.

Dayna Kent, via email



SPOT THE DIFFERENCE ANSWERS, FROM PAGE 95 Missing leaf; berry is larger; paw has moved; berry has changed colour; eye is smaller.

Next month *Weird Britain*

Explore the offbeat, from witches and fire rituals to Stone Age mysteries



Remarkably intact, Skara Brae in Orkney is the best preserved Stone Age village in northern Europe

Don't miss our November issue, on sale 30 October

Plus...

- England's most unusual tiny island
- Wild oddities from museum archives
- A hunt for the monsters of legend



Public transport is failing rural youth: a shake-up is long overdue

Parents of school-age children may well recognise the precarity of rural home-to-school transport. When Paul Dale got in touch from School Transport Action Group, set up by parents to fight a new policy from North Yorkshire Council, I knew where he was coming from.

Not long after parents received confirmation of their child's chosen school place last year, North Yorkshire Council dealt a blow, affecting all parents in the area, too. A dividing line was drawn through a village in order to distribute free bus passes to the child's nearest school only, not their catchment school of choice, which, in one case, is just six metres in the other direction.

Kathy Walker told *The Yorkshire Post*, "It's been a real shock." Her sister, a GP in Selby, is contemplating reducing her hours so she can drive and collect her children from school. Paul Dale calls the seven-year decision "an attack on rural villages". Councillor Andrew Lee, who voted for the policy, offered some hope, explaining "the council is under a lot of pressure to make savings... but we need to make sure we're not just following policy for the sake of it."

As a mum of three (now post-school) children, a former secondary-school employee and school governor, I know this frustrates schools as much as families. But it's not the only challenge around rural-school transport provision. If a school is over three miles away (usual for secondary schools in the countryside), transport must be provided by law. But it doesn't help the



Limited public transport disadvantages rural teenagers academically and socially

child who lives 2.9 miles away on roads without pavements or convoluted, muddy footpaths that extend the miles.

In 2023, three days before the start of the new school year, we and around 100 other families in outlying villages were informed the school transport provider had pulled out, citing unviable fuel costs. A replacement couldn't be found. Our daughter and other village children, some new starters aged just 11, were advised to walk three miles to the local railway station, along unlit, dangerous roads, to catch an early train, then walk a further mile to school.

Other parents were offered 40p per mile for petrol, but only when the child was in the car, not for return journeys to and from a village 10 miles away, making the journey untenable for those without a car, or whose employment wasn't flexible, or the many parents on a low or single income. A replacement service was sorted after a month, but it caused chaos in school and shook the confidence of children and parents

over those most basic contracts: being able to attend school and be a working parent.

When the school transport offer doesn't provide an 'early' or 'late' bus, many rural children are cut off from extracurricular and enriching activities, events, clubs, matches, exam-revision or homework support that they also can't get outside of school.

Nicola Garrard, teacher and author of the brilliant novel *On the Edge* about the consequences of rural, coastal poverty, says "after-school clubs and sports cost parents petrol money they don't have, so those kids miss out". And post-16 education,

where free transport isn't provided, sometimes means acute disadvantage for those living far away and on low incomes. It costs Garrard's 17-year-old daughter £150 a month to travel to college, alongside pensioners with free bus passes that they don't always need.

Public transport is long overdue a shake-up over who it serves and the problem is greatly exacerbated in the countryside. It should offer a gateway and opportunity for young rural people and it fails them, at school age and beyond (a subject for another time). It's a loss and indictment to wider society, leaving many stuck, frustrated, dependent and isolated, when they've so much to experience and give. **CF**

“Have your say What do you think about the themes raised here? Write to the address on page four or email editor@countryfile.com

Nicola Chester's new book *Ghosts of the Farm: Two Women's Journeys Through Land, Time and Community* is out now (Chelsea Green).

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The Stroke Association is registered as a charity in England and Wales (No 211015) and in Scotland (SC037789). Also registered in the Isle of Man (No. 945) and Jersey (NPO 369), and operating as a charity in Northern Ireland.

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